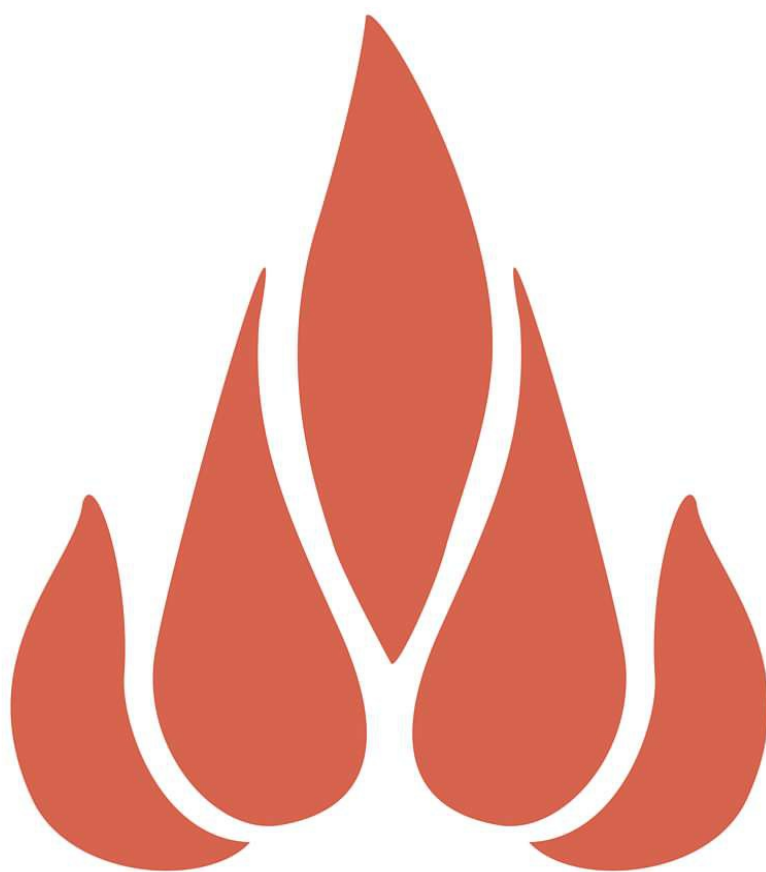


**IN A WORLD
WITHOUT
LIFE**



In a World Without Life

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Prologue - A Simple Story

— And all life vanished.

I want to tell a simple, hypothetical story.

One day, when you woke up, you noticed the lights wouldn't turn on.

Thinking it was a power outage, you checked the breaker, but it wasn't flipped.

The sun had just begun rising, and yet none of your family members were in the house.

And noticing this makes you anxious. When you go outside to look for them, the mysteries just keep adding up.

First, no cars pass by. The traffic lights aren't even functioning.

When you rush into the nearest convenience store, you find not a trace of life, and the automatic door doesn't open for you.

In a state of confusion, you return to your house to retrieve your bike, and using it, you head to the station. As expected, there wasn't a single car on the road, and you didn't pass by a single person.

Even after reaching the station, you find no one there.

That place was one you were familiar with, and every day, it was crowded with people going back and forth.

Even in the middle of the night, taxis come and go, and there was never a time when it was empty.

Your anxiety changes to impatience. You pedal your bike from city to city, searching for traces of human life.

And eventually, your impatience turns to resignation.

Because, even with the changing scenery, there's still no signs of anyone else.

Before you realized it, you had stepped foot in the Capital, Tokyo.

But still, there are no humans, and you notice you're getting thirsty. Your stomach begins to make sounds.

While you do feel slightly guilty, you enter a convenience store that caught your eye, leave some money with a note on the register, and take some lukewarm juice and an Onigiri with you.

After finishing your late breakfast, you begin to regain your composure.

Resolving yourself to return to your own town... your own home, you begin following the path you came.

Buses, trains, and other forms of public transportation aren't running, and still, there are no signs of people.

Of course, there are automobiles and bikes lying around everywhere.

But like everything else, they're empty: unmanned.

It took more time to get back than it did to go, but you arrive at your home.

As expected, your family isn't there.

Looking at the single house that had suddenly lost its landlord, to sum up your thoughts, you were tired.

When you return to your room, nothing has changed since morning. It's the room you're familiar with.

Remembering your fatigue, you spread yourself over your bed.

All that enters your mind are the situation you've found yourself in, and nightmares.

When you wake up, the same morning light that greeted you yesterday flows into your room.

With a bit of hope, you look around all over your house, but your family isn't there.

For breakfast, you simply finish off whatever's in your unfunctioning refrigerator. Yesterday, you had quietly skipped, but today, you decide to put on your uniform, and attend school.

No one passes you on the familiar path you walk every day.

And nothing changes when you arrive. When you enter the school building, and make your way to your class, you find it empty.

It was usually crowded with your classmates; quite a lively place.

You arrived much later than normal, and it's already around 10.

The staff room is no different. No one's there.

Having given up on school, you begin investigating your neighborhood.

In order to find traces of whether a single human being other than yourself remained.

But your efforts were wasted in vain.

The only things you really found out were that all the stores were closed, and there wasn't a single person to be found.

You lie down in the middle of the main road, and think.

Why is everybody gone? Why are you the only one?

And you reach a single idea.

It may be a little wrong, but you decide to illegally trespass.

You walk up to the house of your neighbors, who had been kind to you since you were little.

The front door was locked, but the back window was still open.

Once you got in, of course, the scenery of someone's house stretched out before you.

But still, no one was there.

And you noticed.

— Sets of silverware, and dishes of food were laid out on the table.

Quite an amount of time has passed since the food was cooked, so it's dry and cold.

You don't know just how long it would take food to become like this.

But you guess that it's been around two to three days.

Your trickling worries pour forth like a waterfall, and you burst out of the house.

You continue breaking into every house in the neighborhood, and reach a single conclusion.

It's not that anyone left of their own volition, one day, by some influence, they were suddenly erased from existence.

And the days pass.

... One week. One week.

For seven days, you search every nook and cranny, and try to gather information.

You hold the food you stole from the department store in one hand as you think.

In places with self-generation and solar panels, you can use electricity.

Your home is no longer the one you grew up in. You move yourself between the houses of strangers that can use electricity.

It's not that you didn't feel guilty about it.

But to be caught... you wished for someone to appear to apprehend you for your crimes.

Your ideals cruelly betrayed you.

You quickly gathered up the items in the fridges that would spoil easily.

And not just into a single house, you spread them among all of the houses with functioning electricity.

You heard that canned goods could last even ten years after their expiry date.

But still, a large amount of food will go bad.

After about two weeks, the smell started to stand out.

Not from your own stock, but from the entire town.

Trash that had been thrown away. Food materials in the houses. The contents of the nonfunctioning refrigerators.

But human adaptability is to be feared.

In times of great stress, you were able to get used to it.

And so three weeks passed, and when it had gotten to be around a month, you noticed.

It wasn't only humans.

Around the rotten, blackening food, not a single fly circled.

When you go to the department store, you do not find a single cockroach.

No crows grace the skies, and even after walking through the forest, you show no signs of mosquito bites.

Your only saving grace is that processed goods are still somewhat safe.

It may be tough to categorize them as life, but plants still live on.

Eventually, you get used to life, and decided to take a single course of action.

You would search for some life besides your own.

From a nearby training institute, you borrowed a manual on cars, and began studying without a license.

(TL: Driving isn't as common in Japan)

A few days later, after determining you would be alright, you began your voyage by car.

At the start, you held some fear towards moving a car, but even that quickly faded.

There was no one driving on the opposite lane, and no people in the first place. The traffic signals didn't even work.

When you ran out of gas, you would simply rummage through a close house, and change to a different vehicle.

Your journey continues.

It will continue until you find some form of life besides your own.

Your journey continues.
No matter how much time passes.

Your journey continues.
A day, a week, a month, a year, a decade.

Until you find life...
Until your life runs out...
Infinitely, eternally...

Of course, as I said before, all of this was but a hypothetical story.
But...

If someone like that were to find life... if they were to meet another, then just what sort of face would they make?

†

— It would... definitely be one like this.

Before me was a woman, wearing a robe that covered her whole body. The robe's color was close to silver.
From the hood, that covered almost all of her face, streamed faint, clear silver hair that seemed to be wrapped in light.
Her complexion was that of a person who had witnessed a miracle she had given up on long ago. She shed tears of joy, and gave a wide smile.

『Fukametni temu met mawozamph... Chnitch temu met mawozamph...』

The girl embraced me while spilling out the words of a foreign land.
It's not like I could understand any of the words she said.
There's no way I could truly grasp her heart, her thoughts, or joy.
But I could understand what she was saying.

Thank you for being born... thank you for being alive...

— That day, in a world without life, I met her.

Chapter 1 - A Meeting by Chance

My day started with me lighting mom's tobacco.

"As I thought. There's nothing better in the morning than a cigarette lighted by Mizuki's hand."

"Is there really any difference when I'm the one doing it?"

"Mizuki, it's still too much for a minor like you to understand. There's no point in anything lit by a woman over twenty. If you plan on smoking in the future, then make sure it's lit with an Oil Lighter by a minor. This is my order as your mother."

"Don't worry, I plan on living my life smoke-free."

My mother had always been kinda strange, and she often called for me, her son, to help her with menial things.

This time, she says that if her smokes aren't lit with an oil lighter, by my hand, there's absolutely no meaning.

When father tried lighting it, she got into a bad mood, and said, 'You just don't get it, do you.' But this is merely one of the fun scenes of my house.

My mother's work is, to put it in modern political correctness, a Flower Artist. Other names for it are Ikebana Artist, The School of Thorns, of Flower Specialist. There are various names for it, but if you say any of them, she gets mad, so we just call her a flower arranger.

By the way, when I tried speaking about her to my best friend's mom, or anyone else who knows her, they're quite shocked.

Since mother is this sort of person... how should I put it, quite a few people imagine her being a secretary, or something of the sort.

"Mizuki, did that man leave?"

"You mean father? Yeah, he left quite early in the morning."

"That's good. If he was still in the house, I would have gotten out the divorce papers."

"Please don't say such dangerous things."

"Don't worry. I'll be the one taking custody."

“I didn’t mean it like that...”

My father’s job is Florist.

It seems from a young age he liked flowers, so the inside of our house is filled with ones he raises.

Every day, without fail, he goes to the market to stock up on fresh ones.

I’m not that knowledgeable about it, but sometimes he doesn’t even come home at night. He must really like it.

And surprisingly, Mother was the one who initiated their relationship.

“That man isn’t fit to run a flower shop. Just you watch, Mizuki. In ten years, he’ll be running an entire flower cultivation farm. What’s the problem? I’ll buy all of his flowers. We won’t be troubled with writing receipts.”

“So you plan to keep all expenses and incomes within the family?”

Like this, Mother’s fallen for the flowers Dad raises.

Father also gets along well with my flower arranging mother, so we’re all a happy family... I think?

“I’ll be off to school.”

“Sure, you have to steal a scholarship from that prep school so I don’t have to spend all my hard-earned cash.”

(TL: A prep school is one centered on getting students into college)

“... If you put it like that, I’ll be a little troubled.”

It’s our everyday exchange, so I won’t say much. Mother is always like this.

I pass my cuffs through the sleeves of the school uniform coat I had hung against my chair, and did a final check on the contents of my bag. Next, I stuffed the bento I had made this morning, as well as two condensed coffee milks, and my own creation the Supplement Combo Shortbread into my bag. At that point, Mother popped her head in to see what I was doing.

“Mizuki. You plan on feeding that sugar pig again? Giving food to that one will only do much more harm than good.”

“Mother, would you please stop referring to my best friend as a pig?”

While I am a bit worried about him developing diabetes, calling him a sugar pig is a bit much.

He just likes sweet food a bit more than the average person.

He just likes putting honey and maple syrup in his condensed coffee milk before drinking it.

What's more, he'll only eat chocolate flavored shortbread.

...

"You're quite strange yourself, for having a sugar pig as your best friend."

I'm frustrated that due to his sugar intake, I can't actually deny it.

By the way, he's not actually fat or anything.

"... I'll be off. See ya, mother."

"Sure. I'll be back by 22:00 today."

"Got it. I'll cook the meat dish you like tonight."

This is my everyday life.

I'm often told my family isn't normal, but father and mother get along well, and I have a best friend I've known for the past ten years. Up until now, I've never really been troubled with life.

Right, never once.

The route to school, I was walking down the familiar path as always when it happened.

— Sound disappeared from the world.

To be more specific, it wasn't gone.

The sound of leaves brushing past each other in the breeze, and other sounds that everyone had simply gotten used to hearing still sounded.

But the beat of life, or something like that suddenly vanished altogether.

"...Eh?"

When I turned around, the path I had come down had changed, and when I turned back, the scenery in front was different this time.

The town where I lived had ties to both mother and father's work, and besides residential areas, the place was brimming with nature. But what was currently reflected on my eyes wasn't a scene of an area filled with nature, but nature itself.

If I were to describe it in a word, it would be a forest.

If I were to describe the landscape, I guess a mountain.

If I were to describe the situation... that would be hard with my limited life experiences.

Anyways, a scene of nature much greater than any I had seen in my elementary school's 'class alongside nature' was rolled out before me.

The air is filled the smell of plants soaking in the area's moisture.

Weeds have been left to grow as they please, and the trees grow everywhere without direction.

At the very least, I think the mountains I've been on were a bit more maintained. Thinking back, all of the flowering plants I've seen before were intentionally raised by someone's hand.

"I wonder where I am."

So strange things do happen.

If I wasn't half asleep, I'm sure that I was headed for school.

It may be a prep school, but it takes less than an hour by foot, so I always walk there.

As evidence of my direction, I'm currently wearing the school's designated uniform.

I just checked the contents of my bag, and it's exactly what I need for today's class, so I don't think this is a dream.

But perhaps it actually is.

Dreams like to jump around, and they have no set rhythm, so considering my present situation, it's not impossible.

Yep, this is a dream. That must be it.

Now then, inside of this dream, what should I do?

Since this is a dream of me being stranded in an unfamiliar mountain, should I set returning to civilization to be my end goal?

Thinking about it like that, I noticed that I have to go and get down from this mountain for starters.

Luckily for me, it's a slope all the way down, so if I proceed slowly, I'll eventually get off of this mountain.

For that, I slowly moved forward step by step as I began descending.

The surrounding dirt is drenched, and it clings to the outside of my shoes. They're just the standard sneakers I use every day, so I guess that can't be

helped.

The special mountain-climbing boots Mother and Father have would probably have a firmer grip, and they allow you to walk fine even if dirt and mud stick to them, I think, but I'll have to ask them about it next time.

Both of them kindly share their expansive knowledge on plants, and everything pertaining to them, with me.

I notice something, and stick my hand into my left pocket. Checking the display on my cell phone, I see I have no reception. Even if it's a dream, I see that phones are unusable in mountainous regions. Maybe because it's a mountain, it's getting unpleasantly cold... The sunlight filtering in through the trees is warm, but the mountain's specific atmospheric temperature, and moisture cool my body.

This uniform is supposed to be made of good insulating material, yet still, I'm freezing.

I found it a little wondrous.

But even those thoughts got fainter as I continued to descend the mountain. At the start it was unpleasantly cold, but due to me continuously moving my body, I slowly warmed myself, and my worries faded. Even so, this seems to be quite a large mountain, and even after a long period of time, I can't seem to see the foot. The cold must have been because I was really high up. Originally, I would probably be in trouble without the proper breathing apparatus, but I must be fine because this is a dream.

A few hours later, I started to grow hungry. After finding a clearing to sit, I opened the bento. Inside is an arrangement I thought up taking both nutrition and taste into consideration.

Compared to my best friend, I'm a light eater... no, he's just a heavy eater, so perhaps I'm normal. I begin taking up the chopsticks, and eating the contents.

"Yep... it's not bad."

This may be a dream, but eating in a place surrounded by nature makes food taste better.

The moisture is enough to appease my thirst, and excluding the condensed coffee milk, today's been quite a nice day.

It would be nice if he doesn't develop type 2 diabetes~...

In the real world, I'm probably smiling. I offer some worries for my friend as I finish my bento.

“Even so...”

This place sure is quiet.

As I go further down the mountain, the density of trees increases, and while it's getting warmer, I still hear nothing but the rustling of leaves.

I think it's related to the altitude and season, but the world of my dreams is overly quiet.

I don't hear a single bug or bird cry out.

— It's as if they're all dead...

No that was rude to the god of this mountain. Let me take that back.

I put my hands together, and direct my prayers to the god of food, and whatever god offered me this spot to eat. I apologize, while I offer my thanks.

And having finished lunch, I began my descent once more.

About ten minutes after I restarted my venture, I heard the sound of running water.

I inclined my head, and turned my ear to the sound. When I went that direction, what I found was a river.

In it flowed crystal clear water without a hint of mud, so it seemed drinkable to me. Of course, it may not be fresh water, so I won't drink it recklessly, but as I dipped my hand in it, the cold sensation that came over it was quite nice.

“Good...”

The river is flowing downwards. So if I follow the river downstream, I'll eventually reach human inhabitation.

... Is it just my imagination that there are no fish or insects?

The water is this clear, so it wouldn't be odd to see a fish, or two.

Are they hiding in the rocks? There are less bugs at high elevations, so I may still be too high up.

And about an hour after following the river, the slanted earth changed to level

ground.

After escaping the dense forest of trees, what met me was a vast, clear, blue sky. Higher and more vast than a clear December day. A distant sky. The air is clear, and there's no foreign matter mixed in, it's a good taste.

Eventually, while uneven, I stumbled upon a paved road, so I breathed a sigh of relief.

But what it led to was a ghost town.

What remained was a series of unwelcoming buildings.

I've never seen a scene like this in our history textbooks. At the very least, this isn't the old architectural style of Japan.

What should I compare it to?

Log Houses with different numbers of floors, as if signifying rank, were repeatedly lined up next to one another.

The wooden construction itself seemed to hold some practicality, even in modern Japan. The reason I was sure no one lived here was the abundance of weeds, and the lack of human hands to take care of them.

But for a wooden construction, the structure looks much too new. I don't think many years have passed since it was first set down.

I'm no carpenter, so I'm not that knowledgeable, but I think that a few of these flimsy houses would break construction code.

Of course, it could just be that I don't know, and that houses like these are built regularly. In the first place, this is my dream, so my mind might just be randomly organizing images from my memory.

"Is anyone there?"

I ask in a loud voice.

As I thought, no one answered, so I decided I would have to walk further.

After treading down the path dotted with weeds, I caught sight of some fields. There's produce growing in them, but out of long years of abandonment, wither vegetables, way overripened vegetables, and ones turned black through rot run rampant through it.

Was it abandoned before harvest?

There's also weeds spread across the field, so it wasn't a mere one or two days. A month, or two.

It would take at least a month to get a disastrous scene like this.

If mother saw this, she would be furious~.

She's usually a slovenly person, but when plants are involved, she's more earnest than anyone.

Both me and my Father look up to that part of her.

Of course, I think there are some circumstances surrounding this scene.

But in a few months, is it possible that all the people that lived here suddenly up and left?

I guess possible reasons could be something like Dam Construction.

It probably won't happen immediately, but if the reason is Dam Construction, I'll have to find a worker, and ask where exactly this is.

And while I walked forward, a sense of isolation permeated my chest.

— It's the sounds I'm used to hearing.

Cars, and bikes. The cries of bird and beast.

There isn't a single indication of such sounds.

The only thing I hear is the whistle of the wind, and the click of my own footsteps...it's a quiet, unwelcoming place.

It may not be my place to speak with my little life experience, but...

"I think I... hate this place."

I speak without thinking.

Without knowing the situation, I indiscreetly speak ill of the place. How mean.

But there's no way the current me will come to like this place.

... Let's go. Let's find someone.

At times like this, I think I succumb to loneliness easily.

Even if I meet a scary person, I begin wondering whether or not they're really scary.

My best friend loves special supernatural programs, and ghost stories... and wait, during the summer, I watch them, but the past me was too scared to handle them.

When I was scared like that, Mother and Father taught me.

"Mizuki-kun, ghosts were once human, so they aren't scary. Like all of us, they just have some scary parts to them."

Father told me that.

“Mizuki, ghosts don’t exist. If they did, then it would be unfair if it were only humans. The spirits of the 100,000,000+ bugs that die every year would just be loitering around. Even if it is only humans, then wouldn’t that make this world too convenient for them? See, if you think about it logically, it isn’t scary, right?”

And Mother told me that.

Both of their tales revealed much about their personalities, and made for a good memory. I was happy.

So even if humans carry scary parts inside of them, I believe that they have plenty of good parts as well.

There should be plenty of good things in this place as well.

While I was thinking along those lines as I walked forward, the fields slowly turned to buildings.

This sure is a wide village.

Even though everyone in Japan has to crowd together due to limited living space. I’ll bet I’m really out in the sticks.

“Hmm?”

Throughout the standard line of houses, only a single one seemed to be maintained better than the rest.

That house’s roof was painted in red, and while it was a bit weathered, it had a kind atmosphere.

It was surrounded by short weeds, which was a world of difference from the weed jungles around it. I also smelled the scent of humans. I even smelled the scent of spices used for cooking inside, so there was definitely someone living here.

“Um, Excuse me~! Is there anyone there~?”

When I called out in a loud voice, I heard the sound of metal hitting the ground from within.

Did I surprise them...?

They were probably startled in the middle of cooking, and dropped their cookware.

I hope they didn’t get injured with a knife, or anything.

“Chamme chimiam!?”

It's a girl's transparent voice.

Noisy footsteps echoed within, and what emerged was a foreigner.

It was a log house, so I expected a hinged door, but the door slid open.

Is that native clothing? Should I call it that?

The girl was wearing a silver-ish rain-coat-like hood that covered her whole body, and and from it, beautiful silver hair fluttered out.

Her expression indicated that she was in a panic.

It's often said that it's hard to read a foreigner's expression, but the young-looking girl was different from what I imagined of a foreigner.

She was ephemeral, or should I say her existence was almost transparent. The young girl wore an aura like that.

Eventually, the girl began scanning me. Her eyes slowly moved from the tip of my head to the soles of my feet.

And as the girl's golden eyes took me in, both of her hands slowly moved to cover her mouth.

In her eyes, large drops of water... tears begin to build up.

“I-I'm sorry!”

I unintentionally apologized.

It's not normal for a girl to suddenly burst into tears like that. I must have done something bad... perhaps because I called out in such a loud voice, she accidentally made a mistake.

I don't know if she'll forgive me, but if I'm at fault, I have to apologize first.

“Homehrya Mihimoyse? Lomesonogen Byu?”

“Um... sorry. I didn't understand a word of that... wait, you won't get it if I put it in Japanese, will you... what should I do...”

I don't think this is English. Even so, I have no idea what country she's from, and even if I did, I've never left Japan from the day I was born.

What's more, I only understand Japanese, so I don't think I'll be able to come to a mutual understanding with her.

I-I wonder what I should do.

“Rom d'nokuch. Machmiz hohkichtemum meyomya kezo...”

The silver-haired girl breaks into a smile through her tears, and approaches me. One step .Two steps.

Her reaction indicated her joy at meeting someone. This may be a bad comparison, but it's as if she had once again encountered her beloved, who had parted through death... anyways, it's an expression I've never seen in my life. I was flustered as the girl tenderly clung to me, and repeated the same words, over and over again.

“Fukametni temu met mawozamph... Chnitch temu met mawozamph...”

All I could understand was that her words seemed to contain feelings of gratitude towards me.

“Ah...”

Looking at the hair covering the face of the girl embracing me, I noticed. Her hair wasn't silver. It was transparent, reflecting the light hitting it. I saw her clear hair reflect the scenery around me. I began to regain my senses. My heart was beating several times faster than normal.

Even I don't think that was my intention, but I don't have much experience dealing with women. My body temperature starts to rise. But the beat and warmth I felt from the girl in front of me seemed strangely realistic.

“Could it be... this isn't a dream...?”

Her beating heart transmitted a deep grief to me. It berated me, telling me that this was indeed reality.

Thinking back, from morning until now, time and space have been flowing steadily, and the taste of my bento was the same as it was every day. The condensed coffee milk was just as sweet and stimulating as always.

My body heat, which had been raised from my continued walking, and embarrassment, starts visibly dropping.

If this isn't a dream, then where am I?

If you remove the explanation of, 'it's just a dream', then it's clear this probably isn't Japan.

And there, my thoughts froze.

Japan... not anywhere close. If this isn't Japan, then where is it?

Like that, my thoughts looped.

What should happen from here? What will happen to me?

If I had as much wisdom as my mother, then perhaps I would have been able to think through it, but it's impossible for me.

My mind's in a mess, and I can't even make sense of the current situation.

"Mach milhansoch fuhkalehmo?"

The girl's tone indicates she's asking a question, but I have no way of knowing just what she's saying. But I can see she's smiling, and she's overcome with joy. I don't know why, but I was lured in by her, and I smiled as well.. the cold feeling from before vanished, and my heart felt warm again.

... It must be because this child has such a nice smile.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand your words."

"Honraazya sachmo?"

"How can I get this across... I've heard of non-verbal communication, but should I try gesturing?"

Since Father's a florist, he's knowledgeable about the flowers of various countries.

Apparently, his knowledge was gained when he wandered across various countries when he was young. Of course, there were plenty of countries where conversation wouldn't get through, and through non-verbal communication, he somehow managed, so I'll bet he would have used it in a time like this.

Honestly, up until this moment, I've never looked up to father.

I never imagined that trying to get words through to someone who doesn't speak the language could possibly be this difficult.

"Yamhra Celeilia, mahmila?"

"Y-yamhrashe?"

If I solve the reason for this embrace, I should figure something out. Her expression is soft, so I don't think I'm being attacked, but what sort of answer should I give?

"Hororaazya sanachmo?"

"U-u~m..."

The girl's eyes turn serious this time, as she begs for an answer. It may be a problem with my attitude, but it would be nice if the fact that words aren't getting through was transmitted.

Finally, the girl closes her eyes, and thinks deeply for a moment. Her eyes burst open, and she puts both hands on her body.

“Celeilia.”

“Celeilia? Is that your name?”

When I call out the girl's name, she releases a smile whose radiance rivalled that of the sun.

“Roph! Yamhra Celeilia. Mahmila?”

She happily proclaims her own name to be Celeilia, and shifts her hands from herself to me.

Mahmila... is probably referring to me. It may be a word equal to 『you』or something. If that's the case, then it's my turn to identify myself.

“It's Mizuki. Celeilia, my name is Kagiya Mizuki.”

“Mizuki??”

“Yep, I'm Mi. Zu. Ki.”

“Roph, Mahmila, Mizuki, Sochfumo he.”

“That's right. I'm Mizuki, and you're Celeilia. Is that correct?”

“Roph! Yamhra Celeilia, Mahmila Mizuki.”

For a while, we merely called out each other's name.

I wonder why. Just knowing something as simple as her name filled me with happiness.

I think I understand why Father spoke of his time researching flowers overseas with such fondness.

“Mizumi, lyophzo noiyonan hamo, Mizuki, Ominet?”

Eventually, Celeilia grabs my hand, and leads me into the house.

Even if the owner is inviting me in, I was a bit hesitant to enter the house of someone I just met. But Celeilia seemed so overjoyed that I was unable to refuse.

The inside of the house was nicely cleaned.

But its arrangement was quite different from what I imagined a typical house to

look like.

First of all, it smelled of trees. This is Japanese Cypress... I think. You can smell it in areas with onsens, and when its scent is added to the water of a normal bath, it makes you feel at peace.

That may have popped into my head due to the abundance of plants Father and Mother raise at home.

And for a modern home, the design plan is a bit too old.

A little bit of tampering could cause it to collapse. My frank thoughts are that it's a dangerous house.

“Mizuki, homra yamih mosoumwo, Minetmu meyo?”

From her crying, Celeilia's eyes are a bit swollen, but she smiles as she leads me to a table, and begins bringing food over to it.

The table was made of worn-down wood, and I could feel a deep history emanating from it. The plate the food was placed on was silver... it isn't stainless. It's a metal I'm not really familiar with.

The food was a simple baked bread made out of kneaded wheat flour... no, it was more like pizza crust. That staple bread in India, Nan. There was also dried meat that had been softened through boiling, and various vegetables. It seems to be an eating style where you dip the food in sauce before eating it.

This cooking style resembles what I think is found in the Middle East.

But the clothing Celeilia is wearing is a warm white coat.

I don't really know about brands, so I can't say for sure, but compared to what I'm wearing now, it's made sturdier, and there are pretty ornaments fashioned onto it. It looks quite expensive. This may offend those in the Middle East, but it definitely looks out of their cultural zone.

Of course, it could be that Celeilia is of a different nationality, and she's just living here now, but if I proceed along this train of thought, my mind would merely freeze up like before.

The reason being I lived in Japan, and I was walking through various Japanese streets when I found myself on that mountain.

From her strong will, I no longer believe this to be a dream. So I need to find out why I'm here, and what exactly Celeilia was trying to ask of me.

The climate is foreign, the houses seem old. The plates are silver, and the food

Middle East. There's also her clothing.

I can only think of these as a mismatched jumble.

America, or England. Russia, or Germania. No matter which one you suggested to be her nationality, I would shake my head, but the structure of her face was the Japanese model foreigner: she had the flavor of Europe.

Up 'til there is fine. But what about the next two?

Hanging from Celeilia, that glittering hair surrounded by light... colorless.

There are transparent wigs. If I think of it being made of synthetic polyester fiber it may make sense, but no matter how I look at it, that's glossy life hair growing directly out of her scalp. It's quite healthy at that.

And her golden eyes.

Amber. I've heard amber eyes actually do exist, but unlike a dark yellow, or reddish brown, her eyes seem to be made of the purest gold. They're pretty eyes that seem to draw you in.

"Zofhimimo? Yamihmoki hakiuchit chiyo?"

Perhaps noticing me staring hard at her, Celeilia asked a question. I don't understand her words, but it's probably about the food.

"Y-yeah, let's eat."

I've already eaten lunch, but I've already been invited into the house, and she even provided food, so it's hard to refuse. I couldn't tell her I was already full. More importantly, I don't have a way to get the message across. Seeing Celeilia stack the dried meat, vegetables, and sauce on top of the nan-like thing in good proportion, I tried copying her.

"Delish..."

I'm not sure if it's hand-made, but the smell of freshly baked bread, and the stimulating flavor of the sauce danced around the tongue.

The vegetables were prepared nice and crisp, and while they held a flavor I'd never tasted before, they were fresh and juicy.

They must be organic.

The dried meat was several times softer than it looked, and it had a nice texture to it. Its deep flavor expanded before me as its juices leaked out. I honestly find it amazing that you can get this much flavor out of dried foods.

I have a bit of confidence in my own cooking, but this is much more tasty than any bento I've ever made.

"Yep, it's delicious. Celeilia, it's really good."

"Delisus? Yhyom?"

"Iihyom? Does that mean the same?"

When I say Yhyom, and put food in my mouth, Celeilia smiles happily. It's definitely a word that praises her cooking.

"Yep, Yhyom."

"Mizuki, mawozamph..."

Kind, and truly beautiful. Celeilia said this with a smile, with slightly teary eyes. Mawozamph, I think it was a word she repeated when she was hugging me. I don't know its meaning, but it makes my chest feel warm... something like that. In the end, even though I had been filled up by the bento, I finished all of the food Celeilia set before me.

It truly was good. Though I've eaten an uncomfortable amount, and my stomach aches.

And once lunch was over, I tried asking Celeilia, who had come to collect the dishes.

"Um, what country is this?"

Inside my bag was a geography textbook. I opened it to world map, and show her the depiction of the world. It's my good luck that I was going to have social studies today.

I doubt she doesn't know the area where she lives.

Celeilia seems to have a question mark floating above her head as she gazes at the map I spread out.

"Tamihohan hachlikemia kezohomera?"

It doesn't look like it got across.

If she was using English, then maybe my English textbook would help out, but it seems she doesn't know the language. She had the same reaction to the English one as to the map.

So perhaps she really is Asian.

If so, then perhaps it's Arabian, or Hindustani. Farsi's also possible, though I'm

just recalling what father told me. While I don't think so, Chinese is also viable. Russian technically falls under Asian jurisdiction as well. Of course, I didn't know a single language on the list, so an answer never came.

"Rubochni Byuwhe, Mizuki, Mahmila Zohsa nimiho?"

Having had her interest piqued by the textbooks, Celeilia calls my name in a questioning tone, but her expression is strained as she tries to get words across just as I had attempted.

And closing it as if it were a delicate artifact, Celeilia once more scans me from head to toe. It's as if she was looking at me just as I had analyzed her before. So this is how she felt back then. I'm repenting. I admit it was a bit rude.

As she looks upon me, I think.

From Celeilia's point of view, perhaps a Japanese school uniform looks odd. Though we're pretty much the same, as I see her robe as some sort of unfamiliar native outfit.

Even so, when our eyes met, she smiled.

For some reason, whenever she laughs, I naturally find myself smiling as well. I don't know the exact reason, but I think it's because Celeilia's a good person.

"Lonhah honsoz fudeoch chyake he!"

She joins my hands with her own in joy.

Why is it that this person is so happy?

That question made me quite curious.

But I have a place I must return to.

I'm happy that she treated me so kindly, but I'll have to find my way back once I offer my thanks.

"Um... thank you for everything. Your cooking truly tasted great."

As my words of gratitude exit my mouth, I bow.

Though words don't get through, I made sure to match my actions so that at least the feelings remained.

It seems Celeilia's puzzled as well, but as she's smiling, I'd like to believe she understood.

"Then I'll be off. Truly, thank you very much."

And when I tried to leave the house, Celeilia suddenly clung to me.

“Zuhok chimumo, Mizuki? Losok nahak ohachmock.”

“Um~...”

How troublesome. Celeilia’s raising her eyes in sadness.

It seems she’s asking for something, but I haven’t the faintest clue.

Father did this as well. For now, I’ll have to make it through with gestures.

“I need to return. So I’ll have to search for the path.”

Taking my bag in hand, I point to the door, and make a motion of walking.

“Azahkich hoph? Yasmmichihhyo kichmu!”

Perhaps my non-verbal communication worked. Celeilia gave a nod.

And after a while, Celeilia starts running around the house before returning to me. I don’t even need to understand her words to make out what she’s doing. She appears to be packing.

Did it somehow end up that we’re going together?

Perhaps she’s saying she’ll take me to somewhere with other people.

It may be something completely different, but if she knows someone knowledgeable in geography, at the very least, I won’t be troubled with directions.

And if I meet another in a similar fashion to this, then like with Celeilia, I don’t think they’ll understand my words. Even though Celeilia treated me kindly, I can’t say the next person will be the same. If she travels with me, then it should get a little less dangerous.

If she’s willing to lead me, then there’s nothing better I could have hoped for.

Celeilia comes equipped with a shoulder bag of the same sturdy make as her clothing. Inside, she’s stuffed various things.

A change of clothes, and a spare bedsheet. Dried meat, and what looked like a potato. She has at least enough food to last a day.

Small cookware, a few sets of tableware, a stack of paper.

The paper seems quite crinkly and dry... Is it that parchment thing?

Comparing it to the paper contained in the notebook I use, I can’t really offer any praise to it, and on the front, various geometric shapes that seem to have been burned on. It’s a bundle of paper that’s been hand-made page by page.

After heating the paper, it seems that various colors have been added, and its pages are abundant with reds, blues, yellows and greens.

I wonder if it's something precious to her. Of it could be something religious. Because the clothing she Celeilia wore was so unfamiliar, that's the thought that came to mind.

“Mizuki, Kamiemya he.”

Having finished preparations, she cheerfully comes to me with a bag on the verge of explosion on her back.

She probably said something like『Let's go』, or『I'm sorry to have kept you waiting』.

“Yeah, let's go.”

Using my non-verbal-fu, I point to the road, and nod.

At my motions, Celeilia bows her head, and walks forward.

On the way, I tried to offer to hold her bag for her, but as if to say『It's light, so I'm fine』, she lifted it and lowered it with ease. I was surprised.

Amazingly, it appears that Celeilia has more physical strength in her small body than me.

Should I exercise more to build up strength?

And like that, even when it became evening, we never reached a place with humans.

My feet were experiencing muscle pains, and swellings, but as Celeilia remained energetic the whole way, my manly pride was at stake... no, it's more that I was just watching her.

By watching her, I wanted to try hard as well.

By the time I noticed it, I was filled with those sorts of feelings.

The day came to an end, and a deep crimson sunset shined on the path we tread. Celeilia took something out of her bag, and began preparing for something.

“Is there anything I can help with?”

“Mizuki, mawozanph, rofhe...”

My words were transmitted through actions, and Celeilia nodded happily. She

looked for a tree, and began collecting the fallen branches before showing them to me.

After collecting them, and showing me how to stack them on the ground, I nodded.

“Got it. We’re going to light a camp fire, right? I’ll go collect the wood.”
“Mawozamph.”

A little ways from the path, trees grow everywhere. Just looking around them, I found plenty of firewood.

Wood that’s too moist is hard to burn, so I searched for drier ones.

Because of Mother and Father’s livelihood, I’ve camped before.

They both love mountains, so since I was young, they often made me tag along with them.

I have plenty of camping experience.

Because Mother wasn’t skillful at dealing with people, whenever I was feeling down, she would always take me out to cheer me up.

So I love sleeping in places like this.

The bugs aren’t really to be desired, but the special feeling of camping outweighs those negative feelings.

Now that I think about it, I promised to cook mom’s meat dish today.

At this rate, returning today may be a bit hard...

Mother, I’m sorry for breaking our promise. I’ll definitely compensate you for it, so please forgive me.

I offer apologies to my absent mother as I look for dry branches

“I guess that’s about enough.”

By the time I had finished gathering usable wood, the sun was just about to disappear over the horizon. The sky was dyed a light purple color, and it became twilight.

When I came back to Celeilia, who was busy preparing, I witnessed a strange scene.

Using small stones, she made a circle, and in the very center, she placed a red-colored paper. She stuck three reds there. And she stuck a single green paper on the edge of the circle, as she held a small saucepan in one hand. On the bottom of the pan was a similar blue sheet.

I can understand the red and green being placed for religious reasons, but what about the blue?

Having noticed me, Celeilia took the wood, and placed it on the circle.

“Ah, I forgot to leave the lighter at home, so do you want to use—”

It? Before I could finish, I witnessed an unbelievable scene.

The red sheets flared up, and consumed the branches in flame.

It couldn't even be compared to the flame of a lighter, a blazing flame.

And when I examined it closer, I saw that the green ones were feeding oxygen into the flame.

It's true that fires use oxygen to grow, but in this case, it's as if the flame's actually sucking up the wind.

I was in shock, and I couldn't form a single word.

Could it be that those sheets were soaked in oil? No, I don't think that's right. At the very least, the stack of papers she had was quite dry, and they didn't seem to have anything to bring about a fire of this scale.

More importantly, oil doesn't explain the wind.

Ah, right. There was a blue one on the pan. I shift my gaze to it, and see the pot filling with clear water. Unbelievably, it looked as if the water itself was flowing from the sheet.

“Um... what, is that, exactly...?”

I forgot that words didn't get through as I asked.

At the very least, I don't know of any technology that can bring forth fire, water, or wind from a single sheet of paper.

But of course, it may just be that I don't know, and that it actually exists somewhere. But here, I prioritize my own understanding of the laws of physics, and common sense. I really can't believe the spectacle before me.

If I had to describe it, it would be magic.

Right, Magic.

It's just what came off the top of my head, but『Magic』 describes the current situation quite well.

It's as if the miracles of a fairy tale were unfurling before my eyes...

But does that mean Celeilia is a magical girl?

As I think that, I notice that the full body coat she wears resembles the

magician's robe right out of a fantasy. The witches of the fairy tales I've read were always laden in black, but hers was merely a different color. If she were to bluntly say, 'I'm a magician', I think I would believe her.

"Seruu nahich? Osah miammi hasan rehmech yak he."

Seeing my eyes as round as plates as I stared at the sheets of paper, Celeilia speaks kindly.

I don't really know, but it seems to be a natural fact of life for her.

If you think about it, there's a large difference between her 'normal' and mine.

Of course, that has to do with the place she lives, and the language, but I get the feeling something is fundamentally different here.

It's just that I don't have the means to ascertain the truth.

I swallow the words on the tip of my tongue, and resume assisting her.

Dinner was the nan-ish thing left over from lunch, and a consommé-like soup made by dissolving a powder in the pot of boiling water.

Both of them had a naturally good taste, but eating it alongside nature made it top class.

By the time dinner was over, the sun had completely disappeared, and everything was pitch black.

We don't have anything like an electric light, so it truly is dark.

Our only light is the warm fire blazing before us, and the starry sky above.

I became ecstatic upon spotting the first star. How unbecoming of my age.

But here, I confirmed that this wasn't the town I grew up in.

The air was completely transparent, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. From the mountain of an abandoned countryside, I saw the light of the night sky. I was scared of the darkness, but if it lets me see a starry sky this beautiful, then perhaps I should be glad we don't have any flashlights.

... Even so, it's quiet.

I hear the fire crackle as it continues to eat away at the branches. The only thing else is the sound of the wind tickling my ears.

"Zofh mimo?"

Perhaps because I was gazing so intently at the sky, Celeilia asks me a question. The soup is still hot. It lets out steam that gets carried away in the wind. Since she's asking something, is it about the food?

“Yhyom, I guess.”

“Mawozamph.”

I see. So the words Celeilia just said meant『Thank you』.

Let me offer my thanks to the night sky.

In this country, should I just pray, Mawozamph?

“Nyophna, Mimwanma yochmisal, ofhka hyoph.”

After dinner ended, Celeilia produced a thick, warm-looking cover from her bag.

She’s using it because it’s cold? Or is it already bedtime for her?

“Ah...”

She sits next to me, and wraps it around us both, so that only our necks up are exposed to the elements.

It must be quite high-class. It’s really warm.

But more importantly, any more and my embarrassment will raising my body heat in itself.

There’s also the fact that our surroundings are unbelievable quiet, but Celeilia’s movements. She’s close enough that I can even hear the sound of her breath.

Is the hastened beating of my heart reaching her as well?

Right... sound is...

I take a small breath of air, when I hear the sound of breathing muffled by water.

I turn my head to Celeilia.

She’s quietly crying to herself.

“What’s wrong?”

Did she see through my strange thoughts, and get hurt as a result?

If I’m the cause, then I want to apologize

But Celeilia merely showed me the ephemeral... wide smile she showed me before, as large tear drops flowed down her cheeks.

I want to know the reason for her tears. I want to offer her words of comfort.

I’ve only known Celeilia for a few hours, but I honestly harbored those emotions.

But between us is a high wall of words.

Why is she showing me a face like that...

That question was my only regret.

Chapter 2 - Consolation

Three days passed, and whenever the sun was up, we would continue walking. No matter how far we walk, all we find are empty houses, and fields overgrown with weeds.

Occasionally, unlike the normal houses we passed, we would see large mansions, but even they aren't being managed. Weeds encroach their boundaries.

What we're walking down is a wide road. I guess it was a sort of highway.

I've heard before that in the countryside of spacious countries, the roads go without maintenance, and they stay the same as they were many years ago.

But this should have been a large road before. The hard ground made easy for people to walk on doesn't seem to have encountered a single person or carriage in months. Foliage spreads from the cracks in it.

I remember horse-tail growing from the gaps between the concrete in early spring.

At that time, I was honestly impressed at its tenacity to grow from a place like that, but I feel something different from the plants on this road.

Specifically, what's different? If I was asked that, I don't believe I could answer.

But, something... I feel something wrong.

This land is way too quiet.

How long ago was it that I last heard the cry of the birds, or the hum of the bugs?

When I try tracing back my memory, they were already gone by the time I found myself stranded on that mountain.

Only the rustle of trees and the sound of wind echoes through this world... I can't feel the breath of life.

The only life I can feel is...

"Mizuki, tarte nimyaku!"

Celeilia gives an encouraging voice as she points forwards.

In these days, I've yet to be able to understand her words, but we can at least

come to some sort of understanding with gestures.

“A castle...”

What we was, when we reached the top of a small hill, was a large castle. Compared to the amusement and theme parks I’ve visited, it’s stone made... and built in an old style.

When I think of a Western Castle, I imagine the ones in the amusement parks back home, but this one is quite different.

It’s built out of stones of a single gray color. From the many years since it’s been made, the ramparts have been slightly scorched by the sun.

As if to protect the interior, four towers had been built forming a square around it.

An on the inside, the same stones had been stacked up to create the foundation. It was a solid castle.

But from me who envied the whimsical buildings of the amusement parks, this seems more like a giant prison than a castle.

That’s how different it was to the castle I idealized in my mind.

And naturally spread out around it was a castle town, and houses of the same gray stone of the castle were lines up neatly.

I don’t know what time period the castle was built in, but in Social Studies, I heard that many years of construction have to go into making a stone castle.

Does the fact that it’s preserved so gallantly make it a world heritage site?

Places like these tend to attract tourists, so people should gather naturally.

“Chnika hyoph, Mizuki.”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

There’s a bit of a distance to the castle town, but the simple fact that we have a goal in mind fills me with power. I match Celeilia’s fast pace as we head off to the castle town.

Even though I think I’m going relatively fast, Celeilia is always a few steps ahead of me despite the fact she has more luggage. As a boy, it’s a little embarrassing. Considering our difference in strength, I guess it can’t be helped, but perhaps I should start training my legs.

If I return, a marathon is... harsh, so I’ll at least start walking to build up stamina.

Eventually, we approached the city gates that were so large I had to look up at them

From afar, it looked like a miniature city, but as we approached, I found it exceedingly large.

The gray stone work has been deeply stained black and reddish-brown in some places over the years.

And vines encroach the giant walls.

The bridge that leads into the town... It was also made of stone, and easy to walk on.

After dazing off for a while, I noticed Celeilia standing at the base of the bridge, waving her hand at me. I ran to catch up with her.

As I crossed the empty gate, the sights of the Castle Town extended before me.

“.....”

Just like the castle, the houses lined up were made by piling up loads of stone. While a few weeds grew here and there, the stone paved roads were a welcome improvement to the hard ground.

The houses are equipped with wooden... cross framed windows.

But...

“It’s like a ghost town...”

A town silent as death itself. A silent street. A silent city... A silent world. Life isn’t here either.

From what I can see, it hasn’t been that many years since some of these houses were built.

It’s strange for stone buildings like these to be preserved so beautifully.

How should I put this... it wouldn’t be strange for them to be more weathered or broken, but it’s as if up ‘til a few months ago, people had been living here just fine...

“Mizuki, horriki nit!”

“Y-yeah.”

As I was being overcome with anxiety, Celeilia called out to me.

It may be embarrassing, but I truly am glad that she’s with me.

Celeilia appears to have a goal in mind, and whenever I would have stopped, she

gripped my hand and led me on.

This used to be a large city, I assume. The castle town is really wide, and the streets are so complex I think I would get lost alone.

It's possible that Celeilia once lived in this town before.

Her movements were so smooth that the thought passed through my mind.

"The castle?"

What we were slowly approaching was the castle we saw from the top of the hill.

"Roph, Hitkima mezmo hottecho sokchenma kezo..."

Speaking in a somewhat regretful tone, Celeilia began to increase her pace. When we passed through the castle gate, I looked up at three separate buildings. The first was the large castle. The other two, I don't know.

Celeilia steps into the castle without hesitation. The interior was dim, and slightly moist. The ventilation also seemed bad. Protruding from the wall were stands for torches, most likely used to illuminate the place.

As if they had burned out long ago, chips of carbon were scattered around my feet.

More than a castle, the cold atmosphere of a fort ruled the area.

On the way through, we descended a staircase, but the drop between steps was quite harsh and irregular, so I almost fell many times.

And what Celeilia finally stopped at was gold and silver. A door fitted with many precious metals and pretty gemstone ornaments.

"Mizuki, hohok."

"Is there something beyond here?"

As she nodded firmly, she gave the door a strong push. It won't open.

"Zoph hitte?"

Celeilia tilts her head out of curiosity.

"Could it be..."

I tried pulling at it.

The door, that had been made overly heavy by all its ornaments, drags along the floor as it starts to open.

When I looked towards Celeilia, I found her face was slightly died a pink color.

Is she embarrassed?

So even she makes mistakes.

I had arbitrarily made an image of her as a perfect person who could do anything.

I mean, she showed me magic feats every day. I had expectations, or perhaps it was aspirations.

But perhaps this is a bit relieving.

Up 'til now... no. Even now, I find this lifeless place scary, so that calmed me down a little.

The inside of the door was dark, and I couldn't really see, but a faint glow escaped through the shuttered windows on the other side.

When Celeilia open the window, the room's contents were illuminated.

Everything was intricately decorated... there were a lot of things, but the basic layout of the room included a rug, bed, table, and a book shelf.

On the floor ant table, dust has piled up.

If I were to describe it in a single sentence, this looks like the bedroom of royalty.... Could it be...

"Hmm?"

Looking closely, the area to the right of the shelf's layer of dust was slightly lighter than the rest of the place.

"Roph, hohoki maymo."

As I noticed, Celeilia spoke, and started pulling at the shelf.

I don't know what's there, but I'll help out.

The book shelf was lighter than it looked, and with two people, it was easy to move.

"Is this what you call a hidden passageway?"

Behind it was a hole so narrow only one person could pass through at a time. On the other side of the hole was a stairway leading downwards, but any further

than that was too dark to make out.

“Horrik, Mizuki.”

Celeilia left her luggage in the room. She took a few red sheets with in one hand.

No matter how many times I see them her papers are miraculous. When we camp out, they have a high output, but now they let off a warm light to grant us vision.

With the other hand, she grasped mine, and started descending the stairs. The heartbeat transmitted to me through our linked hands seemed unusually loud.

We descended a few levels, and the atmosphere told me we had made It underground. Before us was a large room, and its contents left me at a loss for words.

It was a mountain of treasure.

What was reflected on my eyes was golden metals, and gem-ornamented accessories. Large jewels, precious-looking old books, crowns and tiaras. There were staffs, and other things that seemed valuable.

There’s the phrase treasure hoard, but I think it’s the perfect phrase to use here.

“Mizuki.”

“Celeilia?”

From the mountain of priceless treasures, she produced a small box, and presented its contents to me.

Six balls of hard candy were lined up.

Because of their age, their quality was much lower than anything you would find in a store.

More importantly, they were placed in an area with no temperature or moisture regulation. Some of them seem to have melted slightly. I’m a little hesitant to try placing one in my mouth...

Before I could say anything, she immediately popped one into her own mouth.

“Rach, Mizuki, o minette.”

She grabbed a single candy, and closed in on my mouth.

I think minette meant to eat. It’s a word she often repeats around eating time,

so there's no doubt it's related to the act.

I look at the approaching candy ball.

It really is a little dirty. This will require some courage to eat.

“If I eat that, I'll ruin my stomach, so...”

“Yazka kachya hachime!”

It was the first time Celeila shouted at me.

She seems a little angry, does she not?

She's asserting her will much more strongly than before, or something like that.

Yeah~... It's scary, but since she's led me all the way here, I might as well muster up some courage.

I take the ball, and timidly pop it into my mouth.

What started rolling and spreading around my tongue was quite a strange flavor.

Not sweet, per say, and it didn't have any sort of scent like mint.

I really can't find words to describe it.

At the very least, in my life, I've never tasted anything that resembled it.

If I were forced to give a description, then perhaps a melting ball of glass that dissolved as I licked it... that sort of flavor.

“Mizuki, are my words getting through?”

“Eh!?”

I heard someone call out to me, so I turned around. And of course, only Celeila was there.

I mean, the voice clearly called me Mizuki.

What does this mean? Could it be that Celeila learned Japanese?

No, that's not happening.

Even if she understood it, she would have told me earlier.

Seeing my dumb-found expression, Celeila offered a soft smile.

“I can call you Celeila... right?”

“Yes, I am Celeila Flamell.”

As she answered my question, Celeila showed a slight moisture in her eyes, as she occasionally did on our travels, as she smiled.

“Always... Mizuki, I wanted to talk to you...”

“With me? Wait, Celeila, just who are you?”

“I am just Celeilia. This country’s... no, Mizuki, a resident of a world different than yours.”

“Another world?”

With a lonely expression, she nodded.

“You may not believe me, but the worlds Mizuki and I were born in are different ones... I think.”

“Um~... you mean like a difference in language, or country, or something like that?”

“Mizuki, I am certain of it. I mean, in the world I live in... in this country, there exists no such thing as the tool you keep in your left pocket.”

I immediately stuck my hand into the pocket.

It was the outdated-model cellphone I had been using for many years.

In the past, when I thought it was still too early for me to have one, Mother and Father bought it for me. The reason it’s so old is for sentimental reasons. To power it, I have to go to the store and buy five batteries. Its functionality is quite low, and compared to the latest trends, it’s quite heavy.

But to me, it’s quite an important item.

“This is just a normal cellphone, though?”

“Right... so to you, it’s normal. Then is this something you often find around you, Mizuki?”

The warm patterned papers painted with Red dyes acting as our light.

Around me... there wasn’t any sort of magical tool like that.

In the first place, being able to understand each other after merely placing a candy in my mouth is strange. It’s something like magic.

The strangest thing was that the words I heard from Celeilia were definitely still the words of a foreign land, but only after my brain has processed it, does it turn into Japanese. If I didn’t call it magic, what would it be?

“Since times are as they are, I’ve been using them like this, but usually you can last a week on a single sheet, you know.”

“Then that candy was the same?”

“Yes, it uses very precious materials to manufacture, so this country’s king only had six of them to call his own, but a person who puts one in his mouth will be

able to temporarily understand the words of others. It's a really convenient item."

"Was it alright to use such a precious thing on me?"

"There's no problem. I mean, its owner, people to accuse you, and people to judge you; they're all gone."

"Eh...?"

I tried to ask what she meant, but unable to spit out those words, the merely dissolved into my throat with the candy.

— It's because of how sad Celeilia seemed as she cast her eyes at the ground...

I just wanted to know why she had to make such a face.

It isn't just today.

Yesterday, and the day before, and even before that, I just wanted to cheer up Celeilia as she smiled to me with such sadness.

"Got it. I'll take your word for it, Celeilia."

"Really?"

"Yep. This world is a different one than the one I lived in. Another world. It's natural that the language is different, and the place I'm in right now is one of the countless countries in this land."

"Thank you... Mizuki..."

"That's my line. Thank you for showing me the roads up until now. I would be really troubled if I were alone."

"That may be so. You didn't seem to be used to sleeping outside... ah, but that crunchy sweet snack was really tasty. Was that your hand-made, Mizuki?"

"Yeah, it's a food from a foreign country in my world..."

In the three days it took to reach here, I thought the Supplement Combo Shortbread (Chocolate Flavored) would go bad, so I fed some to Celeilia.

At the start, perhaps because it was a foreign food, she hesitated like me. But after taking a bite, she seemed to really enjoy it.

"My best friend loves sweet things, but I was concerned about his nutritional balance, so at some point I got around to learning how to make them. Because as long as it's a sweet snack, he'll eat it."

Shortbread is a traditional Scottish sweet, and while there's been a bit of a miscommunication between languages, if you say CaorieMate, most people

understand.

(TL: Calorie Mate is a Japanese energy bar cookie somewhat like shortbread.)

My friend had a similar image of it, so when I tried mixing chocolate into it as an experiment, he happily ate it, so I ground up nutritional supplements, and mixed it in.

“I see. Mizuki, you like that person, right?”

“Yeah, he’s my lifetime friend.”

“I see...”

Celeilia made a really sad expression.

I was about to ask the reason, but in the next instant, a smile resurfaced on her face.

Did I see it wrong?

“But Mizuki, that brown sickly-sweet liquid was no good. That’s long since crossed the limits of rationality.”

The Condensed Coffee Milk is definitely a bit much for the average person. But that man took this irrational liquid, and put honey and maple syrup in it before swallowing it. But the scene was too scary to bring up. I think it’s okay to drink on occasion, but regular intake is hazardous.

“Celeilia, why were you in that house?”

“Because that was my birthplace.”

“I see. It’s nice and quiet, and the air is really clear.”

“... That’s right.”

Again.

For a split second, shadows covered her face, and she made a dark expression, but she forcefully covered it up with a smile.

“Hey, Mizuki. I’d like to hear more about you.”

“Really? Well, I don’t mind, but...”

I really do want to pep her up. But whenever the talk turns in her direction, she hangs her head.

I conceal the questions I really wanted to ask, and at some point, I started talking about nothing but myself.

“My Mother is a person who teaches the art of arranging flowers, and my father is one who sells them, and...”

Before I noticed it, I was talking about those precious to me, my friends, my school, my life, my everyday matters.

It seemed that these pointless details were enough for her.

Eventually, I had dwindled on things to talk about, and the amount of words exiting my mouth decreased in number.

“Mizuki, I’ve decided.”

“Celeilia?”

She grasped both of my hands, and squeezed them.

And unlike the expressions she showed me before, the soft ones that seemed to accept everything thrown at her, she made a serious face as she stared into my eyes.

It felt as if I was going to be sucked into those golden pupils.

And there I noticed.

Her hands had begun to tremble.

Before I could ask her for the reason, she began spinning out words.

“Mizuki, prepare your heart. From here on, I’ll tell you about everything I know, everything about this world.”

“S-sure.”

Once. Twice. Celeilia takes a few deep breathes, before making a serious expression. She spoke.

“There is no life in this world.”

“Eh?”

“To be more specific, three months ago, one day, starting with humans, all forms of life vanished.”

“Life vanished...?”

“Mizuki, did you find nothing strange about the road we walked to get here?”

Of course it was strange.

From the time I found myself on that mountain, to the moment I met Celeilia, I didn’t see a single bug or a single bird.

That didn’t change for the three days I spent with her.

All I ever heard was the sound of the wind, and our own footsteps.
The sound of leaves rubbing against each other, and the sound of flowing water was still there, but there was absolutely nothing else.
Even if she didn't ask, this isn't just the first or second time I thought it strange.
But... I had intentionally prevented myself from thinking about it.

"Yeah, I did think so."

"Three months ago, on the day all life vanished in the neighboring building... the royal magic brigade 'The School of Nil'slodging house, I woke up, but no one was there."

"... And you're sure they didn't move somewhere?"

In order to deny reality, I ask something I already knew the answer to.
Even though, through Celeilia's behavior and the current situation, I knew she told no lies.

"This country's Royalty, Knights, Soldiers, the Court Magicians, Civilians, there's no way that they all moved away at once. No, even if they did, there would be no reason to."

The words Knights and Magicians tamper with my sense of reality, but but even if she didn't explain the fact that an unbelievable amount of people disappeared, I would have understood it.

However, even if that's the truth, why is Celeilia here and well?

From her behavior, I get the feeling that even she doesn't know.

And... the one going through the most pain through this talk is Celeilia...

"At the start, I thought I had just slept in. The eternally lively lodgings were completely empty... but I immediately noticed something was strange. I mean, the soldiers who started training early every morning weren't there either, and there was no one in the castle town."

Let's try imagining it.

On day when I woke up in my own bed, Mother and Father weren't there.

After going outside, I still couldn't find anyone, and when I reached school, my best friend wasn't there.

Even when I went to the station, there wasn't even the shadow of a person...
what would happen to me?

I would be afraid. Simply afraid.

I've heard stories like hers appear in Manga and novels, but still, it's scary.

All of her precious people suddenly up and disappeared one day, the simple thought makes my bode shake.

"I was scared... I searched everywhere. I feared they might hate me, but I even illegally broke into others' houses. After a week, even though I knew it was wrong, I started treating everything in the castle as my own property..."

I don't know the situation, but I don't think it could have been helped. Even if you become alone, you have to live on.

You still have to eat meals, and you have to find a place to sleep. So even if I found myself in a similar situation, it wouldn't be strange for me to find myself stealing from the super markets and convenience stores.

"After that, I searched. The nearby villages, my home town, and even the neighboring countries. But in that country, or the one after that, or even the one after that, there was no one..."

"..."

"In the end, I was tired. I decided to return to my home, and live a quiet life."

I'm sure Celeilia finally gave up.

There was no longer anyone in this world besides her, and from here on, that fact wasn't going to change.

There was more than enough supplies if she wanted to live alone.

If she wasn't going to die by her own hand, even if it was scary, she had no choice but to live.

"And by the time I had gotten used to my new life... Mizuki, you appeared."

"Me?"

"Yes. I thanked god. Thank you for letting Mizuki be born, thank you for letting him be alive... again and again, an uncountable amount of time, I offered my words of thanks."

So that's why she shed tears so happily back then.

If I was in a similar situation, I would have clung to her in tears.

... I mean, what she had given up on had suddenly appeared before her.

"So I always wanted to remain by Mizuki. If Mizuki was going to travel, I

planned on following him to the ends of the earth.”

Past tense? Does that mean that now is different?

“But soon, I noticed. That Mizuki wasn’t a person of this world, that he didn’t know that there was no one else here... that he had only wandered here by some coincidence.”

“... Yeah. I suddenly found myself in a different place than the one I had been in before, I went down the mountain, and I met you, Celeilia.”

“I’m glad Mizuki is a kind person. I was in confusion at that time. No matter what sort of person you were, even if you were a violent individual, I would have followed you.”

Perhaps... that isn’t strange.

There’s no life in this world for her besides me, so even if she didn’t value me as a human, but as a form of life in itself, I wouldn’t feel bad about it.

Even if I was truly a villain, she wouldn’t have resisted me.

I mean, she had fulfilled her dream. Her dream of finding some life out there besides her own.

“When I brought you here, I merely intended to exchange words with you. I never intended on telling you about this.”

“Why?”

“I thought that if Mizuki had to know, he wouldn’t always stay by my side.”

“... Let’s see. No, I think I would still be with you.”

It may have been nice for Celeilia to have found me, but the same goes for me. If I was alone, I would have been shaking in a corner, alone, in this foreign world.

“Mizuki, I’ll say it again. Prepare your heart.”

“...”

In a pained shaking voice, Celeilia declared it.

Her words were of a reality cold enough to trample over all I knew in my world.

No, the truth is more... I noticed it long, long ago.

If I pretended I didn’t know, if I kept fooling her, and deceiving my heart...

It had to come to me in words. I had to have someone other than me say it, or I would have continued escaping from reality for my whole life. That was the sad, cold truth.

“At this rate, Mizuki, you won’t be able to return to your own world. You’ll never see your precious people again.”

It felt as if the ground had collapsed below me.
The blood in my body instantly turned cold.
It should have been something obvious, but it was the truth I had been averting my eyes from.
When I snapped back to reality, I noticed that Celeilia’s words were no longer entering my ears... just the words, 《You’ll never see your precious people again》 kept echoing in my head.

Chapter 3 - True Friendship

— I’m not really fond of the word hate.

†

I hate the rain...

It brings back memories of that day.

On the day of mom and dad’s funeral, it was also raining.

It’s said that in Japan, around ten people die per day.

The statistics fluctuate every year, but still death always seemed to be close to me.

A Traffic Accident.

It happened a little while after I entered elementary school.

My parents became two of the ten.

Cars are convenient and familiar tools, but they’re also the closest danger.

That’s what I learned when I was little.

I was sad. It was painful. It was heart-breaking.

My chest hurt, as if my heart had been gouged out of it.

Even though I’m here, the people who should be with me are gone... that simple fact brought tears to my eyes.

And as I spaced out, as if my soul had been extracted from my body, the funeral ended. The talks immediately turned to if anyone wanted to take me in.

By that time, my tears had already gone dry. With distant eyes, I simply gazed at the ground.

“ _____ ”
“ _____ ”

A woman and a man said something to me, but those words never entered my ears.

Even as I child, I could understand that those words conveyed extreme kindness towards me, but even so, I could only give a weak response.

And eventually, those two ended up taking me in.

A cousin to my dad and mom, and a friend from their youth. A somewhat cold woman, and a gentle man.

They both thought well of me, and even when they were supposed to have work, they would wait every morning to say 『See you later』 when I left for school, and 『Welcome Home』 when I returned.

On the weekends and holidays, they would drag me off somewhere to play.

“I am a teacher of flowers. If it’s about flowers, I’m the most knowledgeable in the world.”

Perhaps she had noticed me hanging my head all the way when we went to an amusement park last week, but this time, she took me to a mountain with nice scenery in another prefecture.

Many types of flowers bloomed all around; a beautiful field of flowers. But none of it entered my eyes...

I can’t show any reaction to the woman... even when I tried to, all that came out was the single phrase, 『I’m sorry...』, and yet to someone like that, she continued to kindly talk about flowers.

The man tried to cheer me up in a similar manner, but I couldn’t answer to his efforts.

The house... wasn’t my house. Even after moving to the two’s house, that didn’t change.

“Today I’ll cook. Food is something that always tastes better when made by a woman.”

The man would always do the cooking, but today the woman tried her hand at it.

Bluntly, it was terrible.

Without saying anything, I silently shoved the food into my mouth, and once the meal was over, I stayed seated in my chair staring out the window.

Of course, it’s not as if I actually saw anything out there. On the contrary, I didn’t want to see anything.

When morning came, the two saw me off, and I left for school.

“Good morning, Mizuki-kun.”

“...”

The teacher kindly called out to me, but my attitude didn't change. I took my seat at my desk.

I wasn't bullied, and the class children tried talking to me out of worry numerous times.

"Thank you... sorry..."

I couldn't answer my peers either. I just spent the entire day staring out the window.

It's not like I was actually thinking anything.

I didn't want to think.

I didn't want to forget mom and dad.

But little by little, as time passed, dad's face and mom's face drifted further and further away... I was sad.

That's why I hated everyone.

I loathed them.

I never voiced it, but I was just enraged at everything around me.

Don't pretend to be dad. Don't try to be mom.

Don't take my precious things away.

To those two, my teacher, and my peers, that was all I could think.

"Mizuki-kun, today we're off, but do you have anywhere you want to go?"

"No... none..."

"Then today, we'll -"

When I quietly muttered, the woman was about to say something, but the man stopped her by shaking his head.

The two of them tried to offer words to cheer me up multiple times, but eventually they left the room I was in. They started discussing something.

Even as a child, I was aware I had done something wrong.

After that, the amount of times they would discuss together simply increased.

The time I spent alone increased with it, so I even felt thankful.

The next week.

It was Friday, and the next day would be off. On that day, I was speechless the moment I stepped into the house.

The entire building was filled with flowers.

“What is...”

At that moment, my heart was flooded with flowers.

I mean, from the yard to the entrance, the hallways and all the rooms, many flowers were hung up. It was just so breathtaking.

“How about that, Mizuki? I told you I was a super flower arrangement teacher, did I not?”

As I was taken by the flowers, the woman said that.

As if her childish heart had been set aflame, she smiled playfully, and started bragging.

“Mizuki-kun, I thought it would be best if you got to know the two of us.”

With a kind and polite tone, the man addressed me.

“...”

“Both me and this man only know things about flowers. We don’t know any way of life that doesn’t pertain to them. It’s vexing, but I can’t do anything to cheer you up. I don’t know how. So I decided to teach you what makes me happy. You got it?”

I didn’t know the meaning of what she was saying.

Everything was a mess... but my expression changed from the one I had on before, and...

“Y-yeah...”

“Good, you nodded for the first time. It’ll get amazing from here on!”

Weakly, like a child being threatened, I nodded. And to me, the woman directed a bright smile.

And after that, it really did get amazing.

Every day when I came home, I would find flowers blooming brilliantly, stuck around everywhere like ornaments to decorate the place.

What’s more, those flowers were ones the man raised from scratch, and the woman arranged, apparently.

I thought that sounded silly, but whenever I got the least bit suspicious, the man would tell me just how he grew them, and the woman, just how she arranged them from start to finish.

Their feelings of just how important their own flowers were to them overflowed until the conversation ended.

And I lost to those feelings. Even though I couldn't bring myself to listen to anything else, for some reason, that alone was able to enter my ears.

Even when I tried to forget, they would pile on more flower information one after the other like an endless waterfall.

I didn't care for flowers in the slightest, but I was able to understand just how much these two loved them.

As well as the feelings they held towards me...

From then on, I tried not to think about it. If I understood, then I would start to forget.

My real mom, and my real dad.

So I resolved my heart to resist as much as possible.

I knew I could never win against the adults, but if it was just my heart, I couldn't lose.

"I'm off... to play."

"Oh!? Mizuki, you made a friend?"

"Y-yes."

"Then out with ye! It's natural for children to be playing with their friends."

I told a lie.

I'm really always alone at school, and even if they talk to me, I reject them.

But even so, the two had small drops of water in the corners of their eyes as they happily congratulated me.

I felt guilt.

They're always putting me first, and they handle me kindly. And Yet, I told a lie.

Just that was enough to make my stomach hurt, as if needles were pricking at its insides.

I sat in the park, in a place hard to see, waiting for evening to come.

And that daily event repeated for weeks. For months.

By the time I noticed it, my thoughts towards the two of them were slowly starting to change.

A woman who gave a stern impression... In reality, she's very kind, but an awkward person.

A kind man... He wasn't analyzing people and putting up a front, he really was a kind person.

But I didn't want to call the two my mom and dad.

If I did, I got the feeling that everything would change... it was a terrible feeling.

And so, even though I had noticed it, I locked those feelings in the depths of my heart.

By the time half a year had passed, my peers had given up on me, and formed their own teams.

As I did nothing but gaze out the window whenever there wasn't a lesson, there was no helping it.

These days continued, even when the year changed, and even after I went up a grade, they stayed the same.

April.

The season of blooming sakura.

Not limited to sakura, it was the season where various types of flowers formed buds.

It was also the season where the two's flower around the house gave off the greatest radiance.

I was a grade higher, and some people I knew, and some I didn't, became my classmates.

My teacher was the same person as before, and from what I'd heard later, he volunteered for it himself.

But I was the same. I treated my new classmates just as I always had.

"E? He doesn't have parents?"

As I turned around, I saw a few boys looking in my direction and talking to one another.

Noticing me looking at them, their expressions turn regretful, and they quickly filter into the corridor.

It occasionally happened.

In most cases, they don't even try to approach me.

In the first place, my heart wasn't open to anyone, so that was natural.

But that child was different.

"Hey, what sort of feeling is it to not have parents?"

He really was a detestable child.
To be able to ask something like that without thinking about the other person's feelings, I question his soul.

"..."

Naturally, I pretended to ignore him, and looked out the window.

"Oy, don't go ignoring me."

He said something like that, but it didn't enter my ears.
No... I didn't even want to try hearing his words.
They make my chest hollower. There isn't a single good thing about it.

"Wanna go home together?"

"Just go with your group..."

"Hey, my house is close to yours, so you are my group. And wait, yesterday, and the day before, we went together, right?"

"I see..."

It seems this kid's house is in the same direction as me, and he greets me daily.

"You see, mom yelled at me for putting maple syrup and honey on my hotcake all at once, you know? So this time I'm putting chocolate, maple, and honey, so I'll be fine, right?"

"..."

The boy kept talking to me every day without tiring of it.
I'm not sure what his problem is, but he kept talking about various things.
From what I hear, this boy has an extreme sweet-tooth. Whenever he opens his mouth, he talks about sweets, and he always competes in the lunch line whenever something sweet is being served.
I... don't really care whether the food is good or bad, so...

"Hey, Mizuki, what do you like?"

"..."

"You've got to have at least one thing, right? Hey? You're always like that, it looks boring."

"..., ...da..."

Bulls eye... I wonder if that's what it was.

Since dad and mom died, every day had been hard, painful, and sad. But more so than all else, everything just seemed so damn boring. Those words, coming from the boy I hated, made me mad for the first time since my parents died.

“I hate it! I hate everyone!”

The boy was shocked, and I ran to get away from the place. After that, it seems the boy's been making a complicated expression. Of course, the amount of times he talks to me has decreased, and he seems to be immersed in thought whenever he isn't eating sweets. It's finally quiet. That's what I thought.

The morning after I was hit with that feeling of relief, I saw my hated rain falling outside. I didn't like going to school on days like this, but I don't know what those two will say if I don't. It seems they considered alternatives, but I have to commute a long way every day. That day, the boy left earlier, so his absence made things really quiet. I got to school, and entered the classroom, but when I got to my own desk, I tilted my head.

“...?”

— Yellow flowers in a vase had been left at on my seat.

“Ku... u...”

When the sight of those flowers entered my eyes, I felt like something I had been storing up suddenly burst out. Ever since my parents died, no matter how much I wanted to cry, I never cried. No matter what I did, all that was there was nothingness, and I was merely sad without meaning. Despite that, I started bawling. Even though my classmates were in the room, I cried without hesitation before everyone's eyes.

“Whoever did this, raise your hand!”

Noticing the sudden situation, the teacher asked this in homeroom with a red face.

And someone raised their hand... that boy.

The boy already had a large bump on the back of his head. I'm reluctant to imagine what led him to be in that state.

"Why did you do something like that!?"

The boy who remained silent, and the harshly scolding teacher.

I couldn't tell why he was mad at that boy.

I mean, we're still in the lower levels of Elementary School, so I'm pretty sure we're not supposed to know what the act of placing flowers on someone's desk is supposed to signify.

(TL: It's pretty much a mocking way of showing respect for the dead. In other words, they're telling you to go die.)

That's why, I stood in front of the boy, and said this.

"No! Tsukishiro-kun didn't mean anything bad!"

Since I, who was always moping about, raised my voice to such a level, both the teacher and the boy were surprised.

"It's because he is, Tsukishiro-kun is... my friend!"

The yellow flowers... Geranium.

In the language of flowers: 「Comfort」, 「True Friendship」, 「Determination」, 「Wishes of Happiness」.

They bloom from April to November, and they're a pretty flower of African origin.

He, Tsukishiro Yuuji learned that my house was a flower shop, and even tried to learn the language of flowers, of which he had absolutely no interest.

In order for me to have noticed, Mother and Father would have had to teach me all about flowers, and he would have had to have been truly worried about me.

Father, Mother, it isn't just him.

I was saved by many people, and now I'm here. I took in a large amount of kindness.

And for having trampled upon all of their feelings, I began to hate myself.

And so I'm not fond of the word hate.

It denies something. A person. A object. A feeling. It's a word that tramples over them all.

I like rainy days.

They signify the day when I realized my Mother and Father, and my best friend reaching their hands out to grasp mine.

To me, they are, reality is-Something that can't be cast away... a precious treasure.

Chapter 4 - Determination

I heard the dripping sound of water droplets hitting the ground.
When I came to it, I wasn't in the underground treasury; I was sitting on the bed in the bedroom of royalty.

Perhaps because it had been left alone for three months, it's quite dusty. But still, it was a room used by those of royal blood, and the bed had a warm, high-class feel to it.

When I look outside, I see that, even though it had been so clear outside during the day, rain flows continuously down from the sky.

《You'll never see your precious people again》

To me, these words were something close to a death sentence.
I have yet to return anything to them.

My clumsy, and kind mother.

The one who's always worrying for others, my good-natured father.

My sweet-loving best friend, who acted without thinking; albeit with good intention.

The thought that I can't meet them again fills me with sad emotions.

But... the sound of falling rain, little by little, begins to soften the pain. That's the feeling I get.

"Mizuki, are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm sorry to have worried you."

At the very least, I don't want to worry Celeilia.

Or else the one who swore it... the young me who swore never to hurt anyone would laugh at me.

"I'm glad that rain started to fall..."

"... You like the rain, Mizuki?"

"Yeah, I love it."

“I see... I also like the rain.”

Well that’s nice.

Rain is usually treated as a symbol of sadness, but it gives me warm emotions. As I strain my ears, I hear the sound of countless raindrops cutting through the air.

There is no life. In this lonely world, I’m glad that the rain managed to live on.

“As I thought, Mizuki, you should not be in this world.”

“What do you mean?”

“I believe I said, 『At this rate』 right?”

“.... Yeah.”

The meaning behind these words was... a possibility.

They’re words meant to offer me salvation.

But...

“If you could do something like that, then why are you here, Celeilia?”

In a world where she had given up hope of finding life.

If she had noticed the existence of other worlds, there should have been the option of leaving for her.

At the very least, if something as convenient as magic, that’s what I would do.

Of course, perhaps there’s some reason she cannot do that.

I asked in a panic, but I’m sure she gave up because she couldn’t do it.

But Celeilia merely shakes her head from side to side.

“Magic is a study that creates being from nothing.”

Out of nothing... in my world, that surely sounds impossible.

If I use a convoluted thought process, I can think of a few similar things, but as long as the condition of, ‘not using anything’ is attached, I guess there’s nothing comes to mind.

“I am of the Royal Magic Brigade, the School of Nil. I’m of those more knowledgeable about the art of magic, you know.”

“School of Nil?”

“Yes, we researched what couldn’t be seen by the eye, and searched for things that weren’t there. There were even studies done into the existence of other worlds.”

“Then... the fact that I’m here is...”

“That’s how it is. If other worlds do exist, then by theory, it is possible to send you to your own one, Mizuki.”

I’m not sure whether or not those theories can be applied.

Even so, if it’s Celeilia’s words, then I’ll believe them.

We haven’t know each other for long, but I don’t think she’s one to tell lies.

She smiled as she saw me breathe a sigh of relief.

“I’ll definitely return you to your original world. Let me make a promise with you, Mizuki.”

“Thanks...”

As I nodded, she happily stood up.

“Then we’ll have to start making preparations immediately.”

“Preparations?”

“Right. While it may sound cool saying we make stuff out of nothing, that’s merely the ideal, and magic isn’t omnipotent. You saw the papers I used to bring forth fire and water, right? It’s best to have something like that when using magic.”

“Hmm...”

I had forgotten since she brought it up, but there hasn’t been a single time where she’s used magic without any tools.

Though this may be a different world, perhaps there are complex rules and parts just like mine.

“I’ll research the necessary measures, and collect the necessary materials. Won’t you assist me?”

“Of course I will. And wait, even though you’re trying so hard for my sake, I was merely watching. I was actually wondering what it was I could do.”

“Fufu, I guess that’s true. Ah, but even if you can’t do anything, it may be nice if you started making the foods that you know how to make.”

“That sounds good. If it’s something we have the materials for, I’ll try my hand at it.”

And together with Celeilia, we retraced the path we came by, and exited the castle.

I had a bit of hesitation arbitrarily using other peoples' stuff, but the rain was heavy, so I wrapped a cloak deeply around my body.

The clothes had been abandoned for three months, so I expected them to be flea infested, and worm-eaten, but I noticed.

The bugs too...

That must be the case.

From the mountain to the castle, I didn't see a single bug, and even though I walked through places brimming with nature, I wasn't bitten once. Normally, such a story doesn't sound possible.

I shake my head to rid myself of the thought, and followed behind Celeilia.

Wearing a similar cloak herself, she walked outside.

The hood was... it seemed to use some concepts from the thing in this world called magic. It repelled rain better than an umbrella I knew of.

... This sure is strange.

As I thought, I have too little familiarity with this magic. It's a peculiar study.

After walking a while, the neighboring building came into view.

I believe Celeilia said it was the facilities of the imperial magic brigades, or something like that.

According to her, apart from the School of Nil, there were many more factions.

When we stepped into the building of a similar stone construction to the castle, the water from our rained-on coats began to drench the floor. But not a single drop of water reached the inner lining of it.

The inside of the building was, as I thought, really dusty.

But I guess there's no helping it with the disuse.

"This is the School of Nil, the leader of the brigade's research laboratory."

The inside of the room was, even more than the rest of the building... there was several years worth of dust piled up.

There were various books and reagents scattered around the place, and it was a room that didn't bring shame to the name of magic research laboratories.

The letters I see are incomprehensible to me. I was never familiar with other countries to begin with, but perhaps because this is another world, it's a writing system I've never seen before.

When I looked closer, there were many of the sheets Celeilia used stacked up

around the place, and on them, transparent geometric symbols were burned into the paper. I can see through the papers to the items behind. This may be related to them being the school of Nil.

“There’s a way to return somewhere in here?”

“Yes, three months ago... after everyone disappeared, I looked through the documents here out of pure curiosity. I remember seeing something like that.”

She spoke as she began digging through the area. Of course, as she did that, dust flew everywhere.

“Isn’t that kinda bad...?”

Perhaps because I wasn’t used to the lack of people, I asked out of fear.

“If there’s someone here to scold me, I’ll happily accept any punishment they have in store.”

Even if you made an error without realizing it, there’s no one here to set her back on track.

That sounded truly sad to me.

What’s more, I prodded her even when she knew full well that what she was doing was wrong.

That alone made my sense of guilt well up.

“I’ll help. What sort of thing are you looking for?”

“Let’s see. Intermediary Papers... they’re scattered all over the area, so can you gather them as best you can?”

Intermediary Papers most likely refers to those sheets from before.

“Got it. IF there’s anything else I can do, please tell me.”

“Yes... Ah, Mizuki, let me debrief you beforehand.”

“Sure, about what?”

“It won’t happen immediately, but the candy’s effect will wear off after a few hours. We still have four, so we’ll probably be fine, but I’d like to save them if possible so I’ll tell you all I can now.”

Since we were suddenly able to speak, I had forgotten, but there’s still a wall of language between the two of us

It would be nice if a single drop could last a lifetime, but I guess otherworldly

tools aren't all that convenient.

We have four, meaning we'll be able to convey our words twice more.

We really will have to save them for when they're absolutely necessary.

"Got it."

"Let's see. First, about food stock, the dining rooms of the other factions... No this time, perhaps we'll just 'borrow' from the castle. There's an ice room that contains ingredients only ever seen by royalty..."

She mostly talked about what we would need to live.

Even for her, it seems this magic isn't something she can complete in a day or two.

And so, we ended up taking and using ingredients stored in the ice room... a large room encompassed in ice, something like a refrigerator.

Livestock like the cattle and pigs you would find in my world had disappeared, but it seems things that had already become meat stayed behind.

Even things outside of the ice room. Even though they were dried out, they weren't rotten.

This is just speculation, but since life no longer exists... perhaps things like fungus and bacteria are gone as well.

By the way, it seems that every few weeks, Celeilia would go to the castle to pick up whatever supplies she needed.

It's not as if there were gas stoves or anything. In the place that looked most like a kitchen, there was an area for firewood, and for stones to use to ignite it.

There was a well nearby to procure water.

I tried drinking it, and the taste was alright. As I didn't destroy my stomach, it's probably safe. Unlike my world, there are no exhaust fumes or anything like that, and perhaps for that reason, this world seems beautiful to me.

In the end, there was little I could help with regarding magic, and if it'll just get more difficult once the candy wears off... It ended up that I started doing all of the housework.

I'd never cooked using stone cookware before, so it was a bit difficult, but even though there was quite a difference in the forms of food we had across worlds, Celeilia curiously ate whatever I brought forth, and happily praised me for it.

This somehow reminds me of the first time I cooked, and had mother try it.

Of course, what the young me made back then was just simple sweets, but mother and father said it was tasty in the same manner Celeilia did now. And that made me happy.

By the way, the first word my best friend Yuuji directed at my cooking was, 'terrible.'

He didn't try to sugar coat anything, and he's just a blunt person, so making him say it was tasty became my goal. And before I noticed it, cooking had become my hobby.

"Mizu... ki. Homomaste umaatte... Hoph saznime mitamchi e."

And after a late lunch, the candy's effects finally wore off.

We had spoken about it beforehand, so I wasn't really surprised, but having words not go through is really inconvenient.

"Chnik hoph."

"Yeah, I'll help out."

After cleaning our plates, we returned to the lab, and began going through the material.

Of course, all I could do was search for the transparent Intermediary Papers, and stack them into a mountain for her.

Celeilia began comparing books and research data. She went to another room... what seemed to be a library for specialists, and began looking through various tools and pages.

The only thing I could do was clean up the area so she could concentrate, and take care of the cooking and laundry.

It was the first time I did laundry without a washing machine, but I was able to pull it off without a hitch.

And after four days of that life, she finally finished her research.

On the fifth day, she closed herself into a lab from dawn 'til dusk.

I don't really get it, but her actions hinted that it was best for me not to enter, so I left food and clothing outside of the door, as I sympathized with my mother from way back then.

And on the morning of the sixth day, Celeilia burst out of the lab with a smile on her face.

"Sanechku, Mizuki."

Unlike when I last saw the lab, one wall of it was covered with those transparent Intermediary Papers.

Red, blue, yellow, green, white, black, various colors of paper were stuck on with some form of order, and complex symbols were carved into the remaining walls, the ceiling, and even the floor.

“Mizuki, hemeno.”

Celeilia took out the box of candies, and placed one into her mouth.

She handed over another, and I ate it.

As I thought, it's a strange taste.

It's neither sweet, or spicy, or salty, and yet I may get addicted to it... that sort of taste.

“Mizuki, can you hear me?”

“Yes, loud and clear.”

After she nodded with a relieved look on her face, her expression turned serious.

It was like the face mother made when dealing with flowers. A face meant for work.

“I did whatever I could. Honestly, if this fails, there's nothing we can do.”

“Thank you.”

“Mizuki, if this fails, then-”

I spoke as if to interrupt her.

“No matter how small of a possibility it is, to me it is a miracle.”

Meeting Celeilia. Having her help me find a way home.

The fact that she was a nice person. The fact that she remained alive.

Thinking of possibilities... It's selfish to ask for anything else.

And so, it won't fail. It will definitely succeed.

I'll believe in the girl who did this much for me.

“I'm thankful to you, Celeilia. Even if it fails, while I'll be sad, I'll be ready to give up.”

“... I see.”

Her eyes water up as she seems to want to say something, but she eventually

closes them quietly.

After she opened her shimmering golden eyes, she continued to open her mouth.

“Hey, Mizuki. Will you indulge in a bit of my selfishness?”

“Selfishness?”

“Yes, Mizuki, I’d like for you to give your day to me.”

It was too small of a desire for me to call it selfish.

It was the wish of a magician, so I thought it would be something grand, but still I think it’s fitting of her. It seems she has some resistance whenever she tries to ask anything of me.

I’ll bet it’s...

Of course, my answer was already certain.

“If that’s it, then I’ll gladly accompany you today.”

“I see! Then I’ll have to get ready!”

Celeilia’s smile was in full bloom.

For some reason, seeing her figure made me feel like something was sticking through my chest.

Chapter 5 - It's Happiness When You're There

The sky was clear, without a cloud in the sky. The perfect weather for a walk. Celeilia wore the silver woven hooded coat she always wore, and took in hand what would be a small basket for hiking in my world, as she walked out from the castle gate.

"We're visiting the Castle Town?"

"Yes. Mizuki, today, I want to let you know my world."

"Got it. The truth is, I was a little curious myself."

I'd spent the last few days in lodgings of the imperial court magician brigades, and while it may have been of my own accord, I hadn't a chance to stop by the castle town. I had only gone through it on the first day.

More than anything else, walking through the desolate streets alone was a little scary.

But bidding farewell to it with such scary sentiment would be sad.

I mean, this is where Celeilia lived, and where many more lived their lives.

I walked beside her, and looked over the town.

There wasn't any wind, and it was warm, so nothing but the dead silence of the townscape came into my senses.

Mine and her footsteps, atop the weed-ridden stone pavement was all that was there to break that silence.

And Celeilia stopped in front of a single house... a store with a small signboard propped up against it.

Even from outside, I could see the store's interior was a bit dusty.

Inside, the stone pots that were used in the castle let me tell it was a food store.

"This is the Lahn shop I frequented. They baked loads of lahn every day."

The word that even the candy couldn't translate was likely the name of a food.

"Lahn?"

"Remember, you ate it on the day we met, Mizuki."

"Oh, that nan-like bread."

“So you have it in your world too, Mizuki?”

“Yep. It’s not all too common in my country, but I’ve eaten it before”

It appears the nan-like lahn was a staple in her country. Grown on rice, I wasn’t all too familiar with it, but it had a pleasant taste that could become a habit.

“It was a shop managed by a guy with quite a scary, rugged face, but the taste was quite nice...”

“I... see.”

Her eyes were looking far away. I’m sure she wasn’t looking at me. She was watching a scene of the restraint full of people. I wasn’t able to see the same world. For some reason, that made me sad.

“... Let’s go to the next one.”

“Yeah.”

We walked off with the lahn shop to our back. The castle town was like a maze, and without Celeilia to lead me, I’d have already been lost. The only things for my eyes to follow were Celeilia and her shadow. I looked at my right hand. This world without another living life was arousing a feeling in my heart I could equate to none other.

Eventually, what came into sight, was a white building. After years of wear, its stone walls had chipped away here and there.

“This is the Nil Magician’s Association I served from when I was eight, to when I was fifteen.”

“Eight? This country puts people to work at such a young age?”

“Yes. Was it different from where you came from, Mizuki?”

“Where I was, even part time work was for high school... around sixteen at least.”

Honestly, I couldn’t conceal my surprise. Of course, from history class, I had known that such an era existed. But from my point of view it was a time too far away... of the distant past, so

seeing one who truly experienced it, seeing Celeilia before me was surprising. Thinking back to when I was eight, that was when I was going to school, and playing around with Yuuji. I couldn't imagine that small self of mine working at such an age.

"For them to be able to go on without putting the children to work... Mizuki, your world is a good one."

"... Right. That's what I want to think."

The worse parts of my world came up in my mind. But a large number of good things came up alongside them.

At the very least, in the scope of the world I could see, there were plenty of kind people.

"What sort of place was this?"

"The association head who lived here was a detestable person. He would work me ragged every day. What's more, my salary was this~ small, and I had to support myself. It was quite a time."

"That's must've been a tough life."

"That isn't the case."

I tried imagining it a little.

A young Celeilia ordered around by a scary old woman.

It was like the tragic backstory of a fairy tale protagonist.

"I was on the luckier side. I mean, I had magic talent from the time I was born, after all."

"Oh really. Come to think of it, what is the difference between the magicians' association, and the imperial magic brigades?"

From their names, it may be hierarchical, or perhaps the latter operated on a national level, but it was difficult to think of what job to equate it to in my world, so I tried asking.

"Right. The magicians' association is practical applications, and the imperial magicians are research, perhaps?"

"I see."

It was different from what I imagined, but a pharmacist and chemist came to mind.

One to sell the drug, the other to make it.

Both were important jobs, to help the lives of others.

As one was managed by the government, I'm sure it had some harsh prerequisites.

"But there's something I still wonder, even now."

"Wonder?"

"Right. There are various sorts of magic, but this country has a rule of one person only being permitted to one type. Break it, and your license is revoked, and you're driven out the country."

"Hmm... that sounds harsh."

"When you want to study multiple magics, you generally have to call over someone from a different faction. There can be months on end of nothing but meetings over it. If one person was simply permitted more than one, I'm sure research would have advanced much further."

One per person might be similar to a business measure.

In Japan's edo period, merchants of a single union had definites on what to and what not to make.

Perhaps magic was the same, and so magic was one per person?

Huh? But up to now, Celeilia's used fire, water, wind, nil. Just from what I've seen, she can use at least four sorts.

Perhaps as she'd said before, she wanted someone to judge her for it.

"So what sort of lifestyle did you live here?"

"We produced intermediary paper. Though compared to what you can find in the castle, it's much lower grade."

It looks like there's a ranking to it.

I don't know the specifics, but it looks like magic's got a lot going to it.

"But here, my sister... not that we were related by blood, but anyways, there was a really king girl living here. If she wasn't there, I wouldn't have even thought to become an imperial magician."

She introduced the absent girl with a happy tone. I'm sure that she was as kind a girl as Celeilia said.

"So you really liked her, Celeilia?"

“Yes, she was really nice to me... I’ll never forget.”

Seeing Celeilia’s expression, the face of the teacher who looked after me in elementary school came up in my mind.

He ended up being my homeroom teacher no matter what grade I was in. A good teacher at that.

He worried for me when I had lost my parents, and looked after me the next year, and the year after that. From a teacher’s perspective, I must have been a pain, but still he was kind.

I won’t forget his rage back when we had yet to learn the meaning of leaving a flower vase on a desk.

He could be scary, but he had me on his mind when he got angry. He must have a kind heart.

And I definitely won’t forget that sentiment.

“I’m sorry, Mizuki. For making it so awkward for a while.”

“It’s alright. I can understand what you’re feeling... no, saying that would just be rude, but I get it a bit.”

“... Thank you. Next is...”

And so she and I roamed around the castle town without people.

Just as the people had walked their home back when the town was alive.

It was vaster than I could have imagined.

The proof of just how many lives had lived... and fragments of those lives remained scattered around in stasis.

Balls that rolled about unadulterated, tableware left on the table, carts parked right in the middle of the roads, merchandise still laid over the merchants’ cloths.

It’s not like everyone had disappeared because they wanted to.

There wasn’t anyone left to know the reason, but I’m sure they were forcefully erased.

Just who could have... maybe it wasn’t anything human to begin with.

But for what purpose did something like this...

It may have been a natural phenomenon, or maybe even a magic I didn’t know of.

But according to Celeilia, it would be impossible to wipe out all life at once.

What's more, not only humanity, all life at all.
Just what fruitless event could have happened...

"Mizuki, you must be tired from all that walking, right? Should we stop for lun... fusa?"

"... It looks like the effect is wearing off. What should we do?"

The effects of the mysterious candy were to last a few hours.
Putting one in my mouth in the morning, and having it last to lunch was a longer time than it had lasted before.

There were two drops left.
According to Celeilia, they were quite a precious commodity, and getting another would be next to impossible, so we had to take them with care.
Because neither I nor she would be able to communicate our thoughts.

"Mizuki."

After calling my name, she popped one of the two remaining drops in her mouth.

"Celeilia...?"

For some reason, she closed the candy box.
I was sure they didn't have any meaning unless two humans ate them at once.

"Celeilia, what are...!?"

The moment I thought I was embraced, I felt the overlap of our lips.
And her extended tongue had the candy balanced atop it...

It's no good. My head was going white, and I couldn't form a thought.
My face felt really hot. It was as if the blood of my body was gathering in my head.

"I'm sorry..."

Celeilia pulled her hood over her head, and hid her expression.
But she was red to the tip of her ears.
Not that I'm one to talk.

"The last one is necessary to return you to your world, Mizuki. So we have to economize them..."

“I-I see. Will we be fine on effective time?”

“Yes. It’ll be a little short, but it should be fine for up to where we’re going.”

“...”

“...”

Uuh... this is awkward.

Perhaps it would be best I said something.

When we had talking normally only moments before, the words were getting caught in my throat.

“For now, how about lunch?”

“Y-yeah.”

Celeilia produced some food from her basket.

It looked like a triangular pie. A food that made me think of something fried in wheat flour.

When I accepted it and took a bite, I found the crisp taste of unfamiliar vegetables and minced meat within.

But the events from before were too impactful for me to remember the taste.

It was tasty. That’s all the memory that remained.

“Well then, Mizuki. Follow me to the last place.”

“Got it.”

We headed away from the castle town, up a road to the top of a hill.

Jutting out from three months’ worth of grass and weed, stood a lone windmill.

On a wide tower built of piled stone, a large propeller leisurely turned.

This world’s characteristic clear air rode the wind to set it in motion.

Only one. A single flower petal danced around in the air.

Beyond the mill bloomed a field of blue flowers.

A variety I’d never come across in the wisdom mother and father had hammered into me from my youth.

And the unique scent of those flowers wafted around in the breeze.

... Yep, this is quite a comfortable place.

“Hmmm! This is my favorite spot.”

After taking a big stretch, Celeilia informed me.

“It really is quite a nice place.”

“I know, right? Even after I grew up, it’s a place I’d go whenever I found some free time.”

With a darkening expression, she pointed her finger towards the castle town. The place we had spent the day wandering around. The person-less town, yet the town where their breathe still remained.

“Mizuki, can I ask for two final wished?”

“Two?”

“Yes. First, instead of Celeilia, could you call me Sherry?”

That was one in my world as well, a pet name or nickname. Something used with people more close to one another.

“Sure. I got it, Sh-Sherry.”

“Ah! You hesitated a bit there.”

“Sorry.”

“Fufu, thank you, Mizuki. Is there any way you’d like to be called?”

“Ye~ah, my friends all just called me Mizuki, so I never really thought about it.”

Is that so, she said as she looked off over the town once more. The wind let her transparent hair flutter. Putting her hand over her eyes, she looked far off into the distance. I could see it clearly because of her hair’s lack of definition.

“The other one is...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t forget this world. Don’t forget... me.”

She took a deep breath before she said that. I looked back over the events of the day. The castle town was scattered with all of Sherry’s memories. And the time we spent walking together had become a good memory for me as well. So without feeling forced at all, I could say it clearly.

“Alright.”

“Mizuki, thank you...”

When I nodded and answered, her eyes turned a little teary.

“Hey, Sherry. If you’d like, do you think you could come with me to my world?”

“... That sounds nice.”

“Then...”

“... But it’s impossible.”

She asserted that quite definitely.

Her expression was... sorrowful, a face of hers I didn’t want to see again.

“All that was written on any of the documents only pertained to summoning.”

“Summoning...?”

“Yes, a system of this world to call forth people from other locations in the same world. Summoning and recalling were made in a pair, so their base premise made it so that you could return those summoned ones to their original locations.”

“Then...”

“But otherworldly summoning operates on a fundamentally different principal. Because you try calling out for something you can’t even know exists, the authors only thought of the summoning part of it. As for recall, all I can do by my abilities is to rely on the memories of the target to influence and aim the spell of the caster.”

I don’t really get it, but I do understand it seems to depend on me.
But then why can’t Sherry come along...

“Mizuki, you can remember your world, can’t you? You can remember your precious ones, can’t you?”

“Y-yeah.”

“And I can’t.”

“Ah...”

All that had been completely natural to me was out of the realm of her imagination.

Just as even now, I won’t really have a grasp of the concept of magic.

Like that, my world... the scent of the air, the scenery, the people, the flora, fauna... she had no way of knowing any of the slight factors my body had grown accustomed to over the years.

No matter how long I talked on about it, even if she could imagine it, there’s no way it would be the same.

“Hey don’t make that sort of face! I can do fine on my own.”

“But...”

“You’ve given me hope, Mizuki. If I tried to wish for anything more, I’m sure god would be angry with me.”

“...”

That can’t be.

A god that would get angry at something like that...

“Now let’s return to the room, and return you to your original world.”

Hen she said that with such strong will, I couldn’t say anything in response.

The road back was silent from beginning to end.

I wanted to tell her something, but I wasn’t really sure what that something was.

This feeling is... one I haven’t felt since I lost me real mother and father.

Unsure of what it was I was so afraid of, unsure of what it was I should do.

“Mizuki... mahrrri...”

Once we had returned to the room, Sherry tried to spin out some words, but the effects of the candy had worn off.

The time was closing in.

I barely had a chance to say the words I had to get across.

Sherry placed a candy drop in her mouth, and exchanged it in the same way she did at noon.

But my body didn’t heat up as it had before.

Instead, something akin to nihility was seizing my heart.

“Mizuki, you treasure your precious things, people, world, don’t you?”

“... Yeah”

That wasn’t what I really wanted to say.

Just what is it I want to do?

Mother... father... Yuuji...

What were they thinking back then when they saved me... I don’t know.

“Mizuki!”

“Y-yes!?”

She suddenly called out my name in a loud voice, so I responded by reflex.

“Is your sentiment towards all you hold dear really something so small!?”
“Eh...”

That’s wrong.
What I ended up leaving behind wasn’t something that trifling.
Everyone was so precious to me, so important and irreplaceable.

“Of course not!”
“Then prove it to me!”
“How?”
“You yourself are the proof. So return to the world, and find happiness for sure!”
“...”

... Oh, I see.
So Sherry was the same.
She saved a powerless me.
She’s one of the people who gave me courage.

“Understood!”
“Then go on. Picture hard the memories of your own world, and hold them strongly to your heart.”
“Yes.”
“You definitely can’t turn back, alright?”

I nodded to her words.
And after reflecting my affirmation in her eyes, she smiled and opened the door to the room.
As if being sucked into that room, the empty air blurred out, and a little red, blue, green, yellow, white, black, various colors were melting into the open space.
It was a peculiar spectacle, as if I was watching a scene from a movie.

“Now picture your precious people in your mind, and keep on walking.”
On those words, I walked into the room.
The moment I took a single step in, I was filled with an uncanny floating sensation.
But still I walked.

“Mizuki...”

I didn't look back.
Because one of my precious people told me not to.

“S...ankh... yew...”
“ _____ ”

It was Japanese.
Even when then candy should have been translating, the pronunciations was off...

『Thank you.』

Those words had come clearly through Sherry's voice.
I walked without turning.
To return to where everyone was.
Sherry said to remember my important people.
Mother, father, Yuuji.
Think of everything that exists in my world.
Believe that doing so would be returning the favor to her.

When I was young, I was helped.
They took my somewhere every week, every day to cheer me up.

When I was young, I was taught.
That flowers were a beautiful thing.

When I was young, I was saved.
I learned I wasn't alone.

On a rainy day, I had noticed it.
That not everything around me was a bad thing.

I walked.
I kept walking.

No matter how painful it is to be, how bitter, how sad...
On the edge of my path, I saw a single beam of light.
That is the place I'm to return to.

Warm colors, the scent of flowers, the saccharine smell of sweets.
It all fit.

Capture everyone's characteristics, their kind hearts.

I walked.

The light gradually approached.

"Everyone..."

The point of light continued to sway as if it would go out at any moment.

Reach out your hand. Reach out.

To return to everyone.

You have to reach out.

My hand touched something.

A yellow flower petal.

Geranium... a flower that held the meaning of friendship.

And it had two other meanings.

One was『Affection』.

The other was...

...『Chance Encounters』.

The language of flowers stuck on to yellow germaniums alone.

"I got it..."

The words I wanted to tell Celeilia were only coming to me now.

The memory of the day everyone lent me their hands played back to me.

The rain was falling, and on that day, I had quite a detestable sentiment.

Flowers were left on my desk, and I cried my heart out.

It wasn't that I was sad.

I was happy.

That I wasn't alone... that there were people who could reach out their hands to me.

"I have to turn back...!"

I'll end up leaving Celeilia alone.

Even when I was the only one who could reach out a hand to her.

"Celeilia..."

Space twisted.

『You definitely can't turn back.』

That's surely what she said.

And so I ended up breaking my promise.

I was unable to comprehend what sort of abnormality would arise in the art of magic.

But...

Even so...

I have to return to Sherry.

And how?

She said it, didn't she?

To imagine strongly.

I dug up all the memories in my head.

Of how I descended the mountain by the river. Of how I followed the river to a ghost town. Of how I met her while wandering lost. Of how we traveled together. Of how I saw magic for the first time. Of how we reached the castle. Of how we first exchanged words in the underground treasury. Of how I spoke of my precious ones. Of how I ate her cooking. Of how she led me around the castle town. Of how she told me to call her Sherry under the wind mill.

And of how Sherry and I... kissed.

Remember.

The happiness, and sadness and whatever else.

Of the days I spent there, remember it all.

In the crumbling form of space, a single light began to form.

... And I reached out my hand towards it...

Chapter 6 - Affection

Red.

On the other end of the light was a crimson sunset.

Around me were blue flowers, and a strong wind.

The spinning propeller of a tower... the windmill was there.

“Sherry... I’ll be there in a jiffy.”

I ran full force down the windmill’s hill to the town.

I lamented my lack of stamina.

My lungs were letting out wheezing sounds as they demanded for air, and I wanted to stop at once for a breather.

But still, I ran.

“Ah...!”

My foot caught onto the weeds growing from the pavement, and I ended up tripping.

And since there was nothing to fall on but rock, my knees hurt.

That doesn’t matter.

There was someone in more pain and sorrow right now.

I sucked it up, stood, and ran off towards the magicians’ brigade tower of the castle.

Luckily, I had just been taught the way through the maze-like streets earlier today, so I remembered them.

The buildings of piled stone caught the red setting sun.

In a world without life, there was only one moving shadow.

Only now, reality I wanted to avert my eyes from, was pushing me ahead.

In this world, I’m the only one that can lend a hand to her.

I passed under the castle gate.

The sunshine was coming to an end, and the world’s color was transitioning from crimson to violet.

Of the three buildings, I turned my feet to one, and ran on with determination.

My running kicked up dust in the facility.

“Mizuki...”

Perhaps because there was no one else, her voice could be heard quite clearly.
Thank god...

If the magic’s influence had turned something amiss, I don’t know what it was I’d do.

“Sherry!”

“Mizuki!?”

When I entered the door, Sherry powerlessly slumped onto the floor, and turned to me.

From her golden eyes dropped large tears.

I purposely chose not to think of her feelings at the moment.

Of the one to live in this world alone... just how painful must it be?

“Even when you helped me so much... I’m sorry... I ended up coming back.”

“Did it fail?”

“No. I returned on my own.”

“W-why?”

“Because I noticed. Even if you can live alone, Sherry, I can’t let you live alone.”

The yellow germanium had told me.

Surely our encounter could have been by chance.

But...

But there still must be a meaning behind such an encounter.

I don’t want her to feel sad. I don’t want her to cry.

I want her to smile forever. I want her in good health forever.

Not the shadow-ridden forced smile she wore, a real smile.

“That’s none of your business! Don’t get so stuck up! Go home already!”

“I won’t go back. You were just crying, weren’t you?”

“I wasn’t crying!”

After wiping her tears with both hands, she shot back strongly.

Her eyelids were reddened, and I could see how much she’d been crying up to

now.

“Return already and find your happiness!”

“I won’t. I can’t leave you alone in a world without anyone, Sherry.”

“You don’t even know how I feel, so don’t speak as if you get it all!”

“Of course there’s no way how I’d know how you feel!”

I don’t understand the feelings of others.

In the first place, I can’t even discern my own.

But just one, there’s one thing I can say, that I know isn’t a mistake.

“I don’t know how you feel... but still I can worry for you. I can sympathize for you.”

The people who had supported me up to now.

It’s not as if they did it because they comprehended or knew all of how I had felt.

But they worried for me, and sympathized in their own ways.

If they’ve lived long enough, it’s a natural feeling anyone could go through.

The ridiculously natural feeling of wanting to comfort your precious people when they’re crying.

Based on the time, such an act may end up hurting them.

But still, I don’t think that it’s something wrong.

On that day... what mother, father, and Yuuji did for me was definitely right.

“And that’s why I won’t return! No matter how much you reject or ignore me, I’ll worry for you. I’ll want you to be in good spirits. I’ll do whatever I can to make you smile.”

Because after all that’s been done for me, it’s my turn to reach out a hand to her.

And that’s what I’ll do.

Now the one who truly needs my hand, is Sherry.

Because she’s a precious person I want to feel happy from the bottom of my heart...

“I will stay here. So that you won’t be left alone.”

“Idiot! Idiot! Idiot... idiot...”

She buried her face into my chest, and hit both her hands against me.

But even that gradually began to weaken, and eventually, she fell to the ground

to hide herself.

There's no way solitude wouldn't be painful.

It's bitter and sorrowful, and scary.

I remember.

The people who should be there are gone.

And even if nothing came of it, that alone was painful.

The agony of losing my real mother and father.

And compared to me, how many times, hundreds of times that number of precious somethings did she lose all at once?

I can't even begin to fathom it.

But if it's just a little, then I can think of it. I can sympathize.

I don't want Sherry to be sad. I want her to smile.

I resolved that, as I held her sobbing body, as if to take her in.

†

From then on, was it ten minutes, thirty, an hour?

The flow of time seemed to slow, and I had no idea what time it was, but we stayed quite a while in that position.

"Mizuki..."

"Yes?"

I gave a soft reply.

Perhaps because she had spent a while longer crying, her tear glands had swelled even more than before.

Her good looks were being wasted, but the demons that had haunted her expression all this time had finally disappeared.

Just seeing that face from her made me happy.

"Mizuki... um..."

"You can take it slow, just say what you want. What we have is a lot of time."

Kagiya Mizuki and Celeilia Flamell.

There were only those two in the world, after all.

"Mizuki, will you really stay with me?"

"Yes. That's what I've decided. It's what something told me in the light."

The yellow flower petal.

The flower that had told me my true feelings.

“But... Mizuki,, you have your precious people...”

Yes, I have irreplaceably important people.

And I’m sure they’d all be angry with me if they learned I returned all smiles after leaving her behind.

It wasn’t like I was returning for their sakes. I wanted to go back, because I was no good without them.

I had noticed that embarrassing, and miserable truth.

And precisely because of how important they are to me, I can’t leave Sherry behind.

That’s why...

“I won’t give up on any of them. But Sherry, I won’t give up on you, either.”

I don’t know.

I don’t know a single thing about this world.

I don’t know about Sherry.

This world reflected in my eyes is a scarce, and narrow, and small one.

I don’t know a thing about anything.

“So let’s go look for some.”

“Look?”

“Yep, look for life. The world’s this vast, so I can’t think you’re the first and last to be found. There must be life out there. Somewhere in this world. So let’s go out to find it.”

“... Together?”

“That’s right. Journey the world to find it.”

The fact that she and I met may have been the work of astronomical odds or miracles.

Perhaps there really is no life left in the world.

But we haven’t even begun to look for it.

And I can’t give up before even trying.

“I won’t be able to endure it alone... so I’d like you to come along with me.”

I extended out my hand.

I was too stubborn back then, that I didn’t even noticed the hands reaching out

for me.

Even if she refuses, I'll just think up the next option to try.

Just as everyone did for me, I'll do to her. I won't break as many times as it takes.

"Are you really fine with someone like me?"

"Don't say someone like me. To me, you're just about as important as the people I left behind in my original world. If you're not with me, Sherry, I don't even feel like travelling."

She put both hands to her mouth, whispered something... and nodded once.

"Mizuki, I like you. More than anything in the world... no, all other worlds included, I like you more than anything."

And in one I had never seen before, a smile as radiant as the sun, she spoke. That confession entered my ears, and my body started burning as it had right after I had run here with all my might.

I'm sure I had cooled down quite a bit while we were talking.

"Oh, are you blushing? Does that make it mutual?"

"W-what are you talking about?"

"I mean, it's the first time I've ever felt this way! Mizuki, you are my fated one, my prince on a white horse, the legendary hero who traversed worlds to come and save me."

"I'm just a normal student..."

So those sorts of stories exist in this world as well.

Saying I'm the one who came to save the protagonist would make me tilt my head.

But I kinda understood the feeling.

To me, my best friend Tsukishiro Yuuji was a hero.

Mother and father were the same, now and before, I liked them most in the world.

Because there's three of them up there, I can't say most in the world, I guess, but if you want to put it to words, that's all that comes out.

"Mizuki, just being with you blows my worries away, and puts a beat in my heart. It lets me believe there are still loads of living things left in this world to be found. It lets me hold hope in tomorrow."

... Well that's good.
I never thought she'd cheer up this much.
On that day, the day I first met her.
I understand why I wanted to see her laugh like this.
Sherry had finally smiled.
That alone made it worth the return trip.

"Ah, why are there few words there to express my affection? If only I could give my heart to you as is, so that you'd be able to understand it all!"

"It's alright. The message got across."

"No, it hasn't! There seems to be quite a different in enthusiasm between me and you."

I get the feeling she was a little too lively, but she was happy, so all's well with the world.

"Hey, Mizuki. I've decided."

"On what?"

With a slightly reddened face, Sherry went on.
Her eyes I had always though pretty were letting off golden sparkles as if they had become something else entirely.
Her characteristic transparent hair let off the light of dusk... it was swallowed in a bluish violet color as it flickered.

"First, I'm going to find all the life left in this world."

"Okay."

"Second, I'll let all the remaining people feel like I'm feeling now."

"That sounds nice."

"Third, Mizuki, I'm making you fall hard for me."

"Eh... t-that is..."

"Finally..."

Sherry closed her eyes, and spoke in delightful bashfulness.
And she spun out her words.

"... I'd like to see your world with you."

Epilogue - In a World Without Life

... That is all I've experienced up to today.
I don't know if you'll believe it, but at the very least, there's no need to worry about me.
No matter how long it takes, I promise I'll definitely come back.
Enclosed with this letter, I've put a number of seeds from this world.
As far as I know, they should be a breed non-existent on that side.
Finally, mother, I'm sorry I wasn't able to make dinner.
I'll definitely compensate for it when I get back.
Well then, I pray you all live happy days.

To:

Kagiya Sachiko
Kagiya Hiroshi
Tsukishiro Yuuji

In the hopes that this letter crosses all three parties,

-Kagiya Mizuki

†

After finishing up the letter, I folded it into a paper airplane.
It was done on the back of some scrap intermediary papers, so green geometric patterns, on a parchment with a toasted texture... A paper airplane powered by the power of folded wind magic.

"Mizuki, oph chichno?"

A few days had passed since I decided to go on a journey to find life.
We didn't have any candy left to traverse the language barrier.
So we had been returned to our initial state without a way to understand one another.
But still, I could somehow tell what Sherry was saying.

“Yep. I just wanted to send this. Thanks for doing all the set up again.”

I held up the paper airplane before the room that would lead to my world.
With my memories up to now, and my feelings for everyone.
I’ve no idea whether it’ll reach.
But Cherry told me it would be fine as long as the feelings were strong enough.
Therefore, I’ll believe. That this letter will reach everyone.

“Please make it...”

I prayed as I let the plane fly.
The magic of the wind intermediary papers produced a gust to let it propel itself.
I traced its path with my eyes, as I wished for its safe passage.
Even if it didn’t have eyes, I put my hands together, and saw it off.

“Then shall we go?”

I held out a hand to convey the go intent.

“Rele, Chnikhi yoph.”

She took my hand, and nodded with a smile.
Even now, the words aren’t getting through.
But I get the feeling we’re linked in a different way.
We walked with our large travel bags.

They were prepared beforehand, clothes, food, dinnerware, and a diverse array of intermediary papers.
It would surely be a long trip, and we could restock up at villages and countries on the way, but we didn’t have any valid travel options, so we’d have to go on foot. So it’s best we have more of the necessary tools.
Even now... I doubt I’ll undergo any sudden change, but I want to build up my stamina.
I’m sure it’ll build by itself while I’m off travelling with Sherry.

“Where should we go first?”

When we’d left the town, passed through the gate, and were in the process of crossing a bridge, I asked.

“Mahr suhna. Chimmohor sohchsana.”

She answered as she pointed her finger.
I think she was saying she'd never been in that direction before.

"I got it. So that way it is."

I turned my body to the direction of her point.

"Mizuki."

"Yes?"

"Awwais..."

Embarrassed, she pulled down her hood to hide her face as she tried to say something.

The parts of her face that weren't covered were dyed red.

"Eh?"

"Awways togethah. P-pro... promise."

... We had plenty of hopes for the future.

I confirmed it as I heard her Japanese.

Today, in this world, I could only head the sound of the wind, and the rustling of the trees.

Two footsteps.

Two shadows.

Two beats.

No people, no bugs, no beasts, and no birds, a world reduced to silence.

I'm sure that it will be a cycle of despair and frustration.

But...

In a world without life, we will continue to search.

... To reach our hands to the life out there waiting.